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# The Rise of the Nontraditional Liberal Arts College President: Context, Pathways, Institutional Characteristics, Views of Search Firm Executives, and Lessons Learned by Presidents Making the Transition

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Dr. Scott Cochrane Beardsley received his Degree of Doctor of Education in Higher Education Management.

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# The Rise of the Nontraditional Liberal Arts College President: Context, Pathways, Institutional Characteristics, Views of Search Firm Executives, and Lessons Learned by Presidents Making the Transition

## **Abstract**

Beginning with Harvard in 1636, liberal arts colleges have a storied place in United States higher education history. Given that the institutions are faculty-led, it is perhaps not surprising that the vast majority of liberal arts college presidents have traditionally come from the ranks of faculty. Yet the context—as defined by institutional characteristics such as geography, religious affiliation, graduation rates, selectivity, or size—facing today’s 248 stand-alone liberal arts colleges varies dramatically from one institution to another. Overall, liberal arts colleges as a group are challenged, as well as many, but not all, of the individual institutions. The contextual perceptions and experiences of the liberal arts college presidents involved in this research are somewhat more nuanced but point to a rapidly evolving industry.

Although search firm executives now conduct the vast majority of presidential searches, this research shows that they do not agree on a uniform definition of a nontraditional president. Quantification of the number of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents shows that they are on the rise across the board and moving into the mainstream, albeit from a variety of pathways. However, a substantially higher percentage of traditional presidents are women versus nontraditional presidents. Further, institutional context is a factor that influences the likelihood of having a nontraditional president. Institutional characteristics that indicate an increased prevalence of nontraditional presidents include lower wealth, lower ranking, and religious affiliation, among others.

Search firms play an increasingly important role in presidential searches, and their executives see a number of important trends underpinning the rise of the nontraditional president. Despite the increase in numbers of nontraditional presidents, search firm executive interviews in the research clarify that the presidency is becoming an increasingly difficult role and that the nontraditional pathway is still fraught with difficulties. Nevertheless, search executives outline successful strategies that nontraditional candidates can pursue to increase their chances of selection. Nontraditional presidents not only share their lessons learned on being selected but also provide different lenses for candidates to consider fit and to make a successful transition to liberal arts college president.

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CONTEXT, PATHWAYS, INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS,  
VIEWS OF SEARCH FIRM EXECUTIVES, AND LESSONS LEARNED  
BY PRESIDENTS MAKING THE TRANSITION**

Scott Cochrane Beardsley

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in

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Degree of Doctor of Education

2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

**THE RISE OF THE NONTRADITIONAL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE PRESIDENT:  
CONTEXT, PATHWAYS, INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS,  
VIEWS OF SEARCH FIRM EXECUTIVES, AND LESSONS LEARNED  
BY PRESIDENTS MAKING THE TRANSITION**

Scott Cochrane Beardsley

Robert Zemsky

Beginning with Harvard in 1636, liberal arts colleges have a storied place in United States higher education history. Given that the institutions are faculty-led, it is perhaps not surprising that the vast majority of liberal arts college presidents have traditionally come from the ranks of faculty. Yet the context—as defined by institutional characteristics such as geography, religious affiliation, graduation rates, selectivity, or size—facing today’s 248 stand-alone liberal arts colleges varies dramatically from one institution to another. Overall, liberal arts colleges as a group are challenged, as well as many, but not all, of the individual institutions. The contextual perceptions and experiences of the liberal arts college presidents involved in this research are somewhat more nuanced but point to a rapidly evolving industry.

Although search firm executives now conduct the vast majority of presidential searches, this research shows that they do not agree on a uniform definition of a nontraditional president. Quantification of the number of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents shows that they are on the rise across the board and moving into

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Search firms play an increasingly important role in presidential searches, and their executives see a number of important trends underpinning the rise of the nontraditional president. Despite the increase in numbers of nontraditional presidents, search firm executive interviews in the research clarify that the presidency is becoming an increasingly difficult role and that the nontraditional pathway is still fraught with difficulties. Nevertheless, search executives outline successful strategies that nontraditional candidates can pursue to increase their chances of selection. Nontraditional presidents not only share their lessons learned on being selected but also provide different lenses for candidates to consider fit and to make a successful transition to liberal arts college president.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **The Rise of the Nontraditional Liberal Arts College President**

Higher education in the United States has become big business, a giant industry in its own right. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2012 expenditures in higher education reached \$488 billion, of which \$306 billion was spent at public postsecondary institutions, \$160 billion at private nonprofits, and \$23 billion at for-profit institutions (n.d.). Appointment as a college president,<sup>1</sup> for many, is associated with the highest degree of educational attainment and respect, replete with noble purpose and mission. For anyone walking around a college campus, paintings and buildings commemorate the passage of past presidents and the influence they had on the institution and the students who passed through their corridors. McLaughlin (1996) concludes, in the eyes of many stakeholders, “the president is the institution” (p. 8). Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority of presidents have traditionally come from the professorial ranks. Since then, the progressive rise of the nontraditional college president has emerged.

#### **1. Liberal Arts Colleges and Their Context**

In this behemoth industry, the liberal arts have a special place in American history, and in the minds of many conjure images of bucolic, tree-lined residential campuses brimming with students and faculty sparring intellectually in the pursuit of knowledge. Not only are liberal arts colleges the oldest higher education institutions in

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, “college president” refers to a university or college president. The terms “college,” “university,” “enterprise,” and “institution” are used interchangeably. The word “president” is also used interchangeably with “chancellor” or the highest-level executive at a college, but does not refer to the chair of the Board of Trustees.

the United States, beginning with Harvard in 1636; they dominated the higher education landscape until the rise of the university structure in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Clark, 1992; Ferrall, 2011). As Victor Ferrall (2011) points out in his book, *Liberal Arts at the Brink*,

It was not until after Yale College became the first U.S. institution to grant a Ph.D. degree, in 1861, and passage of the first land-grant bill, the Morrill Act of 1862, launched the state universities, that undergraduate education outside the liberal arts began its ascent toward the preeminence it now enjoys. (loc. 187)<sup>2</sup>

Defining the liberal arts, and which institutions are liberal arts colleges, is a subject of debate. The dialogue about liberal arts institutions dates back centuries, where the liberal arts were the education provided to the free people—“liber” meaning “free” in Latin. Looking back more than 1,500 years, the liberal arts were divided in the 5<sup>th</sup>-century medieval Western university into seven disciplinary areas: the Trivium—grammar, logic and rhetoric; and the Quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (Wagner, 1983). *Webster’s* defines the liberal arts as

college or university studies (as language, philosophy, literature, abstract science) intended to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop general intellectual capacities (as reason and judgment) as opposed to professional or vocational skills. (n.d.)

At a Pew Charitable Trust roundtable in 1995, the liberal arts were characterized

as residential, devoted to instruction in a broad curriculum of the arts and sciences, designed as a place of growth and experimentation for the young—that remains the mind's shorthand for an undergraduate education at its best. Architecturally and philosophically, the liberal arts college embodies the ideal of learning as an act of community, in which students and faculty come together to explore and extend the foundations of knowledge. (Pew, p. 2A)

Generally speaking, most liberal arts institutions are residential and focus on

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<sup>2</sup> References to “loc.” in this document signify “location.” Sources with this designation were accessed using a Kindle Paper White Model EY21.

undergraduates, while faculty focus on teaching, are not vocational, and have less than 2,500 students (Breneman, 1994; Chopp et al., 2012; Ferrall, 2011).

Breneman (1994) characterizes the liberal arts colleges as “single-purpose institutions, with no rationale for existence beyond their capacity to educate undergraduate students” (p. 4). The Annapolis Group of some of the better-known liberal arts colleges states, “Liberal arts colleges develop intimate learning environments where extensive interaction between faculty, students, and staff fosters a community of serious discourse” (n.d.). As Rebecca Chopp, John McCardell, and Daniel Weiss (2012) define it,

The distinguishing characteristic of most liberal arts colleges is their capacity to create learning environments that integrate the curricular, extracurricular, and co-curricular experiences for all students . . . using the development of critical thinking, a civic perspective, and service to the world as critical components in building intentional communities that can serve as incubators for linking knowledge, freedom, and democracy. (Chopp, McCardell, & Weiss, loc. 757)

Loren Pope (2006) argues that liberal arts colleges “have been on the cutting edge for decades. . . . They have outperformed most of the Ivies and their clones in the percentages of graduates who become America’s scientists and scholars” (p. 3).

The impact of the stand-alone liberal arts college approach also extends to larger research universities. The Pew Roundtable (1995) adds,

When larger institutions wish to design special undergraduate environments that would provide a quality experience in residential learning and mentorship, they build small sub-communities that replicate the model of the liberal arts college. (p. 2A)

In fact, much of the competition for liberal arts colleges comes from these much larger universities with diverse sources of revenue.

The categorization of liberal arts colleges has evolved over the years and is

complex since many colleges and universities combine vocational programs or research with the more traditional liberal arts. The Carnegie system utilized by Breneman (1994) to study 212 colleges (pp. 12, 13) with a combined enrollment of 260,000 students has since evolved and is no longer comparable. A different approach is the Annapolis Group, “representing over 130 leading national liberal arts colleges across the United States” (n.d.). Perhaps the most well-known categorization is the ranking system for liberal arts colleges developed by the magazine publisher *U.S. News & World Report* (USNWR). USNWR’s (2013) categorization system of

251 liberal arts colleges emphasize undergraduate education and award at least half of their degrees in the arts and sciences which include such disciplines as English, the biological sciences, physics, chemistry, history, political science, foreign languages, and the visual and performing arts, but exclude professional disciplines such as business, education, and nursing. There are 223 private and 27 public liberal arts colleges; one is for-profit. (p. 79)

Treating liberal arts colleges as a group masks important variations that exist among institutions. Liberal arts institutions are far from homogeneous. When liberal arts colleges are comparatively analyzed by examination of institutional characteristics such as geography, religious affiliation, graduation rates, selectivity, size, ranking, and financial characteristics such as endowment, price, or expenses, it is clear that there is no such thing as the typical liberal arts college and that there are wide variations on each variable. In some ways each institution can be looked at as a segment of one. Using 2008 data, Ferrall (2011) explored several of these dimensions and clearly portrayed many of the variations. Yet the total size of the liberal arts colleges as a group, and a breakdown of how liberal arts colleges compare along each characteristic post-crisis, does not exist in the literature and is analyzed in Chapter 2 to provide background as to the context in which liberal arts presidents operate.

Liberal arts colleges perhaps attract so much attention not only for their historical importance but also for the quality of students they have produced.

Even though [liberal arts] students represent no more than 1 or 2 percent of total U.S. higher education enrollment, for two centuries tiny liberal arts colleges have produced a . . . large percentage of leaders. Their graduates have been and continue to be at the forefront in every field. (Ferrall, 2011, loc. 295)

Breneman (1994) argues that the liberal arts are “standard bearers” (p. 3) and “at their best . . . provide the finest undergraduate education in the country” (p. 4). However, everyone does not share this view. On the market and economic front, the liberal arts have seen a dramatic increase in competition from vocational and more professional degrees. Sarah Turner and William Bowen (1990) noted in their research that the share of degrees awarded in the arts and sciences, core liberal arts territory, dropped from 47% to 26% between 1968 and 1986 (p. 517).

Liberal arts colleges appear to be adjusting the focus of their missions to adapt to changing circumstances. Hartley (2002) posits, “Liberal arts colleges are invaluable to educational researchers because they have historically been bellwethers of change. They are the ‘indicator species’ of American higher education, signaling the health or fragility of the overall system” (p. 6). Breneman (1994) argues that one of the more admirable and interesting aspects of liberal arts colleges “is their commitment to their central educational missions . . . and [refusal] to shift curricula toward more immediately marketable technological or vocational subjects” (p. 3). The context surrounding this “canary in a coal mine” institution has clearly been one of difficulty the past few decades, and is one facing all presidents leading them, nontraditional or not.

Robert Zemsky (2013) argues that, more recently, “liberal arts colleges, . . . in substantial numbers, have survived by becoming something else: comprehensive master’s

degree institutions with a growing array of professional programs requiring advanced study and specialization” (p. 127). Ferrall (2011) documents the shift:

In 1986-87, more than half of the 225 liberal arts colleges had more than 90 percent liberal arts completions. . . . In 2007-2008, the number of colleges with more than 90 percent liberal arts completions had dropped by half (to less than 25 percent). Over the same period, the number of colleges with 30 percent or more vocational completions increased from 33 to 118. (p. 57)

This mission drift is important as it strikes at the heart of a college’s value proposition and what it means to various constituents. As Hartley (2002) points out in his research on three liberal arts colleges’ mission over time, “mission matters to members” and stakeholders (p. 143).

Beyond mission drift, liberal arts colleges are losing market share in higher education. As David Breneman (1994) recounts,

In 1955 liberal arts colleges still accounted for nearly 40 percent of all institutions—732 private colleges . . . enrolled only 7.6 percent of all students. By 1987, the Carnegie Foundation identified 540 out of 3,389 institutions (16 percent) as private liberal arts colleges, with only 4.4 percent of total enrollments. (p. 21)

As Zemsky (2013) points out nearly two decades later, speaking in his chapter about ‘a liberal arts conundrum’, “Today that diminishing continues. Liberal arts colleges account for substantially less than 2 percent of all undergraduate enrollments” (p. 126). In 2000, to further illustrate the plight of liberal arts schools, McPherson and Schapiro (2000) estimated that fewer than 100,000 students attended liberal arts colleges, “where the majority of students major in the liberal arts and live on campus, and where admission is moderately selective (turning down, say, more than a third of those who apply)” (pp. 49–50).

The rationale for why liberal arts colleges are in trouble and demand is decreasing

for stand-alone liberal arts colleges is a subject of debate, but it includes factors such as unfavorable demographic shifts, the recession, aggressive competition from public universities offering look-alike honors colleges at subsidized prices, price cutting from the richest universities for the best students driving the need for increased tuition discounting, changing student needs toward vocational offerings, and affordability concerns (Breneman, 1994; Chopp, 2012, 2013; Ferrall, 2011; Zemsky, 2013).

Ferrall (2011) argues,

Liberal arts colleges are at risk—the poor colleges, of slipping away into vocational instruction or disappearing altogether; the rich colleges, of becoming irrelevant. (loc. 54)

Resuscitating demand for liberal arts education is the single greatest challenge liberal arts colleges face (loc. 102).

Zemsky (2013) posits one reason for today's struggles is that [a] really good liberal arts college is an expensive operation—small classes, a constantly expanding knowledge base that somehow needs to be taught, a business model that often requires draconian investments of merit-based financial aid, and a sense on the part of the students they most want to attract that a small residential college is too confining. (p. 127)

Generalities aside, there is tremendous variation among the starting positions of each of today's 248 liberal arts colleges from a selectivity, ranking, and financial point of view, yet the literature provides limited quantified insight into both the current situation and what has happened over the five years since the beginning of the crisis.

Beyond a general sense that the context is challenging, what the precise implications are for a liberal arts college president are unclear, although it is the hypothesis of this research that the challenging context has resulted in changes to the profiles of presidents hired. Chapter 2 analyzes institutional characteristics that illustrate the context such as selectivity, graduation rates, and financial trends from 2008 to 2013,

and portray a dramatically changing landscape and variations in starting points. I explore the idea that certain characteristics describing institutional context might influence the propensity to select a nontraditional president in Chapter 5.

Looking forward, there is no agreement as to what should be done about the context, and what exactly liberal arts college presidents should do to ensure the long-term viability of these institutions. How liberal arts presidents perceive and are experiencing the existing context is unclear from the literature and is explored in Chapter 3.

## **2. Traditional and nontraditional college presidents: definitions, pathways, and importance**

The literature on the college presidency is extensive and conflicting. To understand the type of president sought, it is important to understand the role and responsibilities against which that person will be measured. Yet there is even disagreement as to whether or not the role of president is important. Cohen and March (1986) argue that presidents are more symbolic than significant, make little difference on campuses dominated by faculty, and “occupy a minor part in the lives of a small number of people . . . [and] have some power, but little magic” (p. 205). Presidential power is held in check by the natural constraints of shared governance and loose organizational structures bordering on anarchy. Birnbaum (1988) asserts, “Leaders in higher education are subject to internal and external constraints that limit their effectiveness and may make their roles highly symbolic rather than instrumental” (p. 29). The leadership styles often found in business—hierarchical, with clear targets and profit orientation, in addition to well-defined processes and accountabilities more associated with top-down decision making—seem to some incompatible with higher education (Birnbaum, 1988; Cohen &



March, 1986).

Some studies lament that the college presidency has been unnecessarily weakened by shared governance run amok. At this end of the spectrum are Fisher and Koch (1996), who emphatically argue that presidents can transform colleges and that “reliable empirical evidence demonstrates that . . . college presidents can make a difference, and are capable of transforming their institutions” (loc. 63–64). McLaughlin and Riesman (1990) acknowledge both of these camps but support the notion that a college president can make a difference, asserting, “There are a significant number of presidents who do change the course of colleges or universities they head” (p. 4).

In any case, when presidents transition into their new role and are learning to assert their authority and attain legitimacy, it is crucial to understand the context of shared governance. As Bornstein (2003) puts it,

Power in the academy is distributed differently from the centralized power of the CEO in a typical business corporation, and the president’s ability to act with authority and use the power that resides in the office depends much more on the attainment of legitimacy with stakeholders. (loc. 590)

There are differing views on how to do this. Fisher and Koch (1996) believe that legitimacy flows from the transformational power inherent in the presidential position and that power can be conferred only top down by the board (loc. 391). Others, like Birnbaum, believe that legitimacy can be gained only through interaction with multiple stakeholders. For Bornstein (2003), “to gain legitimacy, a president must demonstrate a leadership style that comports with the culture of the institution” (loc. 632).

In the challenging liberal arts context specifically, there is limited research as to the importance of the president across a cross-section of colleges over time. However, liberal arts college case studies point to the importance of the choice of president and that

the president in the liberal arts context enjoys particularly greater degrees of power.

Hartley (2002) asserts,

[Liberal arts] presidents make a difference. . . . They serve as a potent symbol to members. A major contribution of a president occurs even before he or she arrives . . . as discuss[ions] . . . of particular attributes in a candidate . . . can be the beginning of consensus for a particular kind of change. (pp. 144, 145)

Gaylor (2003) concludes that a combination of specific factors in liberal arts institutions—notably, a narrower set of constituents to manage, financial fragility and the ability to communicate it, and a more unified commitment to mission—“not only strengthened the presidents’ use of rational power, but access to other sources of influence as well” (p. 225) in a way that is fundamentally different from research universities. “Presidents at these [liberal arts] institutions were powerful. . . . Constituents expected and accepted presidential power on critical decisions” (p. 226).

Although there may be lack of consensus as to the degree of power and importance of the college president, there is no disagreement that they are expected to play an active role on many fronts and have to confront the diverse challenges facing the institution overall as the accountable executive to the Board of Trustees. As a result, the role of president has become increasingly challenging, with countless stories of failure. Tractenberg, Kauvar, and Bogue (2013) report that “during 2009 and 2010, fifty college, university, and system presidents resigned, retired prematurely, or were fired” (p. 37). The American Council on Education has been conducting a survey on the Profile of the American College President since 1986. Their 2012 survey supplement states:

Since the 2001 survey, the areas in which presidents spend the most time have remained unchanged. Presidents cited fundraising, budgets, community relations, and strategic planning as the areas that occupy most of their time . . . fundraising was the area presidents stated they were least prepared to address when they began their presidency. (para. 11)

However, the role of the president extends far beyond these narrow areas.

Presidents are now expected to address a broad range of critical arenas including setting a vision, interacting and inspiring students, managing alumni and external relations, attracting and developing world-class faculty, managing the board, balancing the budget, delivering extensive fund-raising, improving rankings, representing the school in the local and global community, managing risks, and carrying out many forms of change in a complex, shared governance environment. Although there is no agreement as to the importance of the position, there is broad agreement that the role is all consuming, and increasingly difficult and complex (Birnbaum, 1988, 1992; Cohen & March, 1986; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Hull, 2010; McLaughlin & Riesman, 1990; McLaughlin, 1996; Pierce, 2011; Sanaghan et al., 2008; Trachtenberg et al., 2013).

Perhaps the best illustration of the diverse expectations of today's liberal arts president is shown by the job description posted by Trinity College (2013):

The new president will have the opportunity to focus on the following priorities:

**Stewarding and raising the institutional profile and visibility of the College:** Provide the intellectual leadership and integrity to inspire and achieve the College's ambitions; Strengthen Trinity's reputation as a leading liberal arts college and help define the value of a Trinity education with national and international audiences; Articulate the College's distinctive characteristics, accomplishments, and aspirations to internal and external constituencies to convey the strong value of a Trinity education; Continue the great momentum of strengthening the academic stature of the faculty and support its continued development; Expand data-driven decision making by utilizing institutional research, marketing, and communications capabilities to determine creative strategies for raising Trinity's profile; and Creatively and strategically leverage the College's resources to continue enrolling the high-quality student body for which Trinity is known.

**Increasing the financial capacity and resources of the College:** Strengthen relationships with alumni and diverse constituents to grow the endowment in support of Trinity's ambitious goals; Continue the tradition of attracting and closing transformative gifts for the College; Invest in advancement to enhance fundraising capabilities; and Manage resources in a fiscally responsible manner toward the College's long-term, strategic interests.

**Envisioning and articulating an innovative long-range plan that builds on Trinity's rich history and traditions and affirms Trinity's distinctive location**

**in a capital city:** Build on the solid foundation already in place, consulting widely to make wise, bold, and visionary decisions for Trinity's future; Think strategically and guide and support concrete steps to achieve clearly articulated goals; Weave together the campus and community for the enrichment of both liberal education and public life; Embrace the Hartford community and participate actively in its economic development and community efforts and conversations; and Link classroom learning to the community. **Trinity seeks an individual with deep enthusiasm for the College and a distinctive set of qualifications and attributes, with particular attention to the following: Innovative, creative, and energetic leadership:** Ability to bring the community together around a powerful vision of what Trinity can be, while leading the campus in celebrating its many successes; Innovative, entrepreneurial thinking, with an openness to strategic change and new possibilities, with a record for leading in new directions and spearheading groundbreaking initiatives; and Collaborative leadership style with the ability to encourage and facilitate campus-wide collaboration among diverse constituencies. **Relationship building and community engagement:** Ability to engage with a passionate, global alumni body; Effective communication skills across a diverse range of constituents with the ability to build mutual respect, trust, and confidence among faculty, staff, students, alumni, trustees, and the community; Reputation for cultivating faculty as partners in shared governance and institutional decision making; and Appreciation of Trinity's urban location, enthusiasm to connect with the surrounding community in mutually beneficial ways, and understanding of the politics surrounding an urban environment. **Management, marketing, and business acumen:** Readiness to lead the overall administrative and educational operation with an ability to delegate responsibility; Ability to collapse silos and facilitate a campus culture in which all members think globally about the impacts of their work on the greater institution; and Technical, fiscal, and budgetary agility. **Passionate and effective fundraising:** Record of inspiring and persuading individual donors, and corporations and foundations, to financially support the College; and Enthusiasm around broadening the base of philanthropic support from a variety of constituencies and reengaging with alumni around new initiatives, visions, and aspirations. **Student-centered champion for academic excellence and rigor:** Expectations of the highest level student academic performance and social behavior; and Appreciation for the values of an educational experience in a liberal arts setting. (pp. 25–28)

Clearly, finding the combination of distinctive visionary, CEO, politician, innovator, academic, fund-raiser, and advanced-analytics marketing expert all wrapped into one person is almost impossible, and the job description reveals in many respects the expectations of many diverse constituencies. The breadth of responsibilities indicate that in searches like these it will be the weighting that any given stakeholder in the selection

process gives to a certain set of criteria, allowing tremendous latitude of interpretation as to whether a traditional or nontraditional candidate would best fulfill the role. In the case of Trinity College, they selected a traditional president, Dr. Joanne Berger-Sweeney, former dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University.

Despite being a mainstream concept broadly used in higher education vernacular, there is not one uniformly agreed-to definition of what a nontraditional president is. There is agreement that someone who has been a full-time faculty member and come up through the academic ranks to be a provost or chief academic officer is a traditional president (Cohen & March, 1986). There is also agreement that someone who has never worked in higher education at all is nontraditional. However, between the two extremes there is no commonly accepted definition of what exactly a traditional and nontraditional president is, rendering different surveys to quantify the number of nontraditional presidents incomparable. Among search firms that conduct the majority of presidential searches, there appears to be no commonly accepted definition in the literature of a nontraditional president.

There are many pathways that can provide the preparation and apprenticeship required to be a college president. Historically, this has been through a traditional path through the academy, but the changing requirements of the presidency, and the sheer number of searches every year, have increased the number of nontraditional candidates with a background centered outside of higher education. Four studies provide different definitions and frameworks for considering the presidential career pathway and classifying traditional versus nontraditional presidents. A “six-rung ladder” developed by Cohen and March (1986) puts forth the following traditional steps to the presidency:

student or teacher/minister, professor, department chair, dean, provost or academic vice president, and president (p. 20). Wessel and Kein (1994) finessed this framework, asserting that there is not only an academic path similar to Cohen and March's ladder, but also a less scholarly path through administration, which afforded experience in higher education without an academic career.

Almost 25 years after Cohen and March's research and firm assertion that the traditional model is virtually the only path to the presidency, and in recognition of a changing presidential reality, Birnbaum and Umbach (2001) conducted a detailed study based on demographic data from previous American Council of Education President Profile surveys and constructed a framework for possible career paths to president by examining the most recent positions before becoming a president. They put forth two primary categories: traditional and nontraditional. Birnbaum's definition of a scholar being a traditional president overlaps with the definition of Cohen and March. However, in addition Birnbaum (2001) specifies that someone who has had an entire career in higher education but come through the administrative or dean roles can also be considered traditional and called a steward; this view is similar to Wessel and Kein. Birnbaum's nontraditional category has two subgroups: one called "spanner," meaning presidents whose pathways varied between higher education and contributions to other professions and who may or may not have been faculty; and the other "strangers," indicating those who have never been faculty and have had their career in outside positions in business, politics, the military, or other nonprofit organizations such as the clergy.

The final framework for categorizing presidential pathways is the American

Council on Education (ACE) Pathways to the Presidency (2013) study that quantitatively examines the immediate prior positions of current first-time college presidents. They use six categories: Previous President; Chief Academic Officer; Other Academic Officers; Non-Academic Officers, Chair/Faculty and Outside of Higher Education (p. 5). The ACE survey does not use the exact terms traditional versus nontraditional president. Instead, ACE focuses its analysis on first-time college presidents and specifies the number of presidents who come from outside higher education as a proxy for nontraditional. The ACE Pathways survey (2013) is useful since it provides longitudinal data over almost a 20-year period of time.

In many industries and professions, market share and personnel data are tracked rigorously. For example, professional sports track backgrounds and statistics of athletes in great detail. No such databases or market data exist in higher education that track how many university or liberal arts college presidents in a given cohort or year (e.g., current generation of presidents) are from a traditional or nontraditional background. Equally, there are no statistics that provide similar breakdowns by executive search company.

The baseline definition, the Beardsley definition, that I am using is that a traditional president is someone who—at some point in his or her career—has come through the full-time tenure faculty track, whether or not they have attained tenure as a full professor. A president who has not come through the traditional tenure track will be considered to be nontraditional. Thus, a faculty member who has at one point been an associate professor, or an assistant professor, would be considered traditional, whether that person achieved full tenure or not. An adjunct professor, or someone who has never been a tenure-track professor, would be considered nontraditional. However, I equally

attempt to provide comparability with both the ACE and Birnbaum definitions. How search firm executives define a nontraditional president in today's environment is something I explore in Chapter 4.

The reasons why college presidents have historically been drawn from the traditional ranks are myriad. Cohen and March (1986), in their analysis of presidents in the 1970s, concluded that presidents are almost all local (have worked, studied, or lived nearby), are traditional, are academic administrators, and are from the academy because of the two to three decades needed to assimilate the values of higher education. The most simple explanation is that traditional candidates understand the particular values, culture, research, role of faculty, and shared governance of higher education and, as such, can be more effective (Birnbaum, 2001; Cohen & March, 1986; McLaughlin & Riesman, 1990; McLaughlin, 1996; Pierce, 2011). Although the role of college president has shifted from a primarily internally facing academic one, with responsibilities increasingly delegated to a provost, to a focus on fund-raising and managing external constituencies, traditional candidates with some experience in these domains are clearly advantaged (Pierce, 2011).

According to existing definitions, the clearest path to the presidency has been, and continues to be, the traditional path from academe. Birnbaum (2001) concluded using 1995 data that among all college and university presidents, the traditional path is most prevalent with 89% (66.3% scholars and 22.4% stewards), and only 11% (7.4% spanners and 3.9% strangers) nontraditional (pp. 205–206). Among baccalaureate colleges, many of which are liberal arts colleges, Birnbaum's analysis (2001) revealed 14% were nontraditional, slightly higher than the overall population.

Using their somewhat different definitions 18 years later than Birnbaum, ACE



(2013) reports that the greatest source of first-time college presidents is still the traditional provost or chief academic officer. They use five categories that yielded the following results: Provost or Chief Academic Officer (44%); Other Academic Officers (13%); Non-Academic Officers (16%), Chair/Faculty (4%), and Outside of Higher Education (23%) (p. 5). The ACE (2012) president profile study reports that 70% of presidents still come from full-time faculty positions (para. 10). Birnbaum (1992) explains that exemplary presidents gain and maintain the support of faculty through judicious involvement and acknowledgment of their strengths and that failed presidencies typically stem from loss of faculty support (pp. 96, 98), insinuating that the traditional path makes eminent sense.

Trends indicate increased demand for nontraditional president profiles. ACE (2013) reports that the percentage of nontraditional presidents recruited from outside higher education is 23 (p. 5), more than double 2001 and more than five times the number since Cohen and March's research in 1974. Liberal arts and other universities face many nonacademic problems. As the ACE (2012) President Profile study summarizes it,

Rapidly ballooning enrollments, escalating fiscal pressures, the change engines of technological advances, a wide array of constituents, and a tumultuous political climate all make it more important than ever for college and university presidents to understand and be responsive to their communities and the contexts in which higher education takes place. (para. 18)

Anecdotal evidence suggests that nontraditional presidents are more likely to be hired by institutions that are weaker or in financial difficulty, of the sort many liberal arts college find themselves in. Pierce (2011) concludes that boards of trustees and presidential search committees are interested in candidates with business experience in budgeting, fund-raising, and advancement; and

are therefore more willing and sometimes even eager to entertain nontraditional candidates, believing that success in business, government, the diplomatic corps, and nonprofit organizations will translate to the academy and that these nontraditional candidates . . . will possess skills and experiences that Chief Academic Officers may not have. (p. 145)

Glover (2005) contends in his research that “institutions that could be considered as ‘weak’ externally were more commonly led by nontraditional presidents . . . and more likely in difficult financial situations, in need of rebuilding structurally or physically, [or] in turnaround situations,” whereas “institutions that could be described as ‘strong’ overall tended to be led by a mix of traditional and nontraditional presidents” (p. 172). However, there is no quantitative research that analyzes what type of school is most likely to hire a nontraditional president, for any definition of nontraditional. Chapter 5 analyzes the characteristics of liberal arts colleges with nontraditional presidents.

Age may determine pathways to the presidency. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the mean age of a president was 38 years old (Cohen & March, 1986, p. 9); the presidency has aged substantially since. As the ACE (2012) President profile explains,

Two decades ago, the average age of college and university presidents was 52. Today, it is 61. In fact, in 1986 just 13 percent of presidents were over the age of 60. In 2011, 58 percent of presidents are over 60. One possible reason for this aging of the presidency is the increasing complexity of leading a postsecondary institution. As colleges and universities face a growing number of internal and external challenges, governing boards and search committees are likely looking for more experienced leaders. (para. 5)

The baby boom generation entering retirement, as well as increased turnover of college presidents, will create a need for more college presidents. However, the traditional source of provosts and chief academic officers is also aging, potentially driving up demand for nontraditional candidates. The ACE Pathway to the Presidency (2013) report specifies that about a third of chief academic officer candidates are over 61 (p. 10).

In addition, traditional candidates appear less interested in the role. Less than one-third of provosts or chief academic officers aspire to become a president. More than 70% report spending little or no time with alumni or on fund-raising, and many feel that the traditional pathway of the college president through the academic track is no longer sufficient (Barden, 2009 para. 3, 4; Lorden, 2009; Selingo, 2013). Richard Ekman (2010), president of the Council of Independent Colleges, summarized in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece titled “The Imminent Crisis in College Leadership”:

At both public and independent institutions, academic leaders say presidential duties are inherently unattractive in comparison with their own jobs or those of faculty members. . . . [I]t is the increasingly external orientation of presidential duties that best explains why just . . . 24 percent of (chief academic officers) at independent colleges still aspire to become college presidents. (para. 2)

Perhaps a more fundamental reason why the number of traditional presidents is shrinking and will continue to shrink is that the number of tenured faculty has been dramatically declining and will continue to do so. William Bowen (2015), in his new book, *Locus of Authority*, documents the shift, pointing out that “in 1969, tenured and tenure-track faculty accounted for over three-quarters of all faculty (78.3 percent); in 2009, tenured and tenure-track faculty accounted for just over one-third of all faculty (33.5 percent)” (p. 152). The trend does not appear to be abating. In forthcoming research, Gary Morson and Morton Shapiro of Northwestern University predict that the trend will continue and that by 2040 “only around 10 percent of positions will be held by tenured and tenure track professors” (as cited in Bowen, 2015, p. 153). This is a fundamental shift that dramatically reduces not only the pool of traditional candidates going forward, but also the percentage of traditional faculty involved in the shared governance process. It is hard to imagine why this trend would not increase the number

of nontraditional presidents going forward.

Existing research does not provide a breakdown of nontraditional presidents' pathways overall, nor does it provide insight into the liberal arts specifically. The Birnbaum data is 20 years old. Neither the ACE Pathways survey, nor the literature, provides insight into whether these nontraditional candidates have previously been faculty or other higher education roles such as described by Birnbaum's "spanners" in jobs that preceded the post they held when named president. However, Madsen (2004) sheds empirical light in her research titled "Institutional Decision-Making in Liberal Arts Colleges Led by Nontraditional Presidents," concluding that the four former lawyers turned liberal arts college president accomplished critical goals on their campuses. They were able to overcome cultural barriers and brought specific skills and capabilities such as fund-raising acumen, international contacts, and an ability to raise the standing and stature of the institution. Additionally, some of the shared governance aspects of legal partnerships translated well into the academy. Chapter 4 analyzes the numbers of nontraditional liberal arts presidents versus the ACE, Birnbaum, and Beardsley definitions.

Besides having followed a certain career pathway, it is possible that a nontraditional president may have certain characteristics that are either different from the presidential populations at large or help to explain how that person came to be a president. The quantitative relationship between the prevalence of a nontraditional candidate and gender, tenure, predecessor characteristics such as traditional or nontraditional, or previous institutional ties is not explored in the literature. Chapter 4 explores these characteristics of nontraditional liberal arts presidents.

Thus, existing research clearly indicates that there is both a traditional and nontraditional path to the college presidency, with the nontraditional path growing in numbers. However, the traditional academic path (as defined by ACE or Birnbaum) is still predominant and more than three times as common. Against a context that is increasingly demanding—with higher presidential turnover, an aging and hesitant traditional candidate pool, the need to manage change, and a very broad presidential role description and expectation that few can satisfy—the ability to find presidents will strain traditional and nontraditional pools of candidates alike in the years to come and raise the stakes in the selection processes. In the liberal arts context there is no clear consensus or thorough fact base indicating whether nontraditional presidents are more or less likely to assume the presidency and, if so, under what conditions, although there is support to indicate that challenged institutions are more inclined to seek nontraditional presidents.

### **3. College president selection processes and the role of executive search firms' selection processes**

With presidential searches reaching more than 400 per year and rising, traditional candidate pools shrinking, and role difficulty increasing, the work of the selection committee is becoming more difficult and important. Liberal arts colleges, with their own challenging context, often have to compete with better-resourced schools for presidents. Moreover, the stakes are high. A derailed or failed presidency can damage the individual irreparably, cost the institution millions of dollars, create frustration in many camps, and tarnish the institution's image (McLaughlin, 1990, 1996; Pierce, 2011).

Searches are expensive. Turpin (2012) estimates that the cost of a typical presidential search could exceed \$1 million (p. 9). Clearly, the composition of the

selection committee also has an influence on the candidate selected. Historically, the selection process was the domain of the Board of Trustees but increasingly is a complicated process where faculty, students, alumni, administrators, and professional staff jockey for influence in choosing a successor. In many ways, the selection process allows an institution to express its priorities and increasingly seems like a rough-and-tumble political selection process (McLaughlin, 1990, 1996; Pierce, 2011). McLaughlin (1990) observes, “Many college . . . searches . . . become politicized and factionalized at their very outset by disputes over what constituencies should be represented and in what numbers” (p. 57).

Whereas in the past, candidates were often promoted from within, today this is the minority of cases. In a 2007 survey only 28% of presidents were promoted from within, and 21% in liberal arts colleges (ACE 2012, 2013, p. 1). Pierce (2011) argues that this is partly because Boards of Trustees may be pursuing the very best in the nation, seeking new ideas, wanting broader diversity pools, or are simply acting out of necessity because internal candidates may have made decisions that are unpopular (p. 171). Thus, it is essential for selection committees to recruit candidates from outside their institution. Given the intense competition for college presidents, “the best search committees recognize that they are both buyers and sellers . . . and the need to court candidates” (McLaughlin & Riesman, 1990, p. 294). In fact, as in business, many of the best potential presidents do not come looking for the job and need to be lured and convinced.

Selection processes often focus on checklists and a detailed set of steps as to how to conduct the search process. One of the early frameworks outlining the process was Nason’s *Presidential Search* (1984). A series of nine steps are suggested including: (1)

establishment of search and selection machinery; (2) committee organization; (3) criteria formulation; (4) candidate pool development; (5) candidate screening; (6) candidate interviews; (7) top candidate selection; (8) presidential appointment; and (9) winding down and gearing up (Nason, 1984, as summarized in Turpin, 2012, p. 29).

Much has been written on the process, perhaps because it is so important and sometimes dramatic, but also because it is so complex and unique to higher education's shared governance tradition. McLaughlin and Riesman (1990) outlined in their book, *Choosing a College President: Opportunities and Constraints*, a thorough overview of the process and its pitfalls based on a number of case studies. They add the importance of confidentiality, specifics on committee composition and modus operandi, the role of executive search firms, and the importance of due diligence and background checks. The Association of Governing Boards (AGB) (2012) has outlined a 20-step process with 14 specific responsibilities to be carried out during a presidential search. The AGB adds a number of very specific elements including establishing funds and timeline for a search, how and whether to conduct a search on the search firm, and a number of suggestions on communication. A wide range of research underlines the role and importance of boards in conducting the search for presidents and chief executives (Birnbaum, 1988, 1989; Neff & Leondar, 1997; Pierce, 2011).

For nontraditional candidates, a primary challenge of the search is to ensure they understand the basic principles, vocabulary, and workings of the academic enterprise. In essence, the challenge is to get in sync with the culture of the traditional candidates. Susan Pierce (2011) concludes that nontraditional candidates must understand these elements to be successful in a search process: intricacies of shared governance; hiring and

tenure; curriculum reform and its politics; enrollment practices and demographics; discounting and net tuition revenue; student affairs; interdisciplinary programs; the “amenities war”; athletics, drinking, and fraternities; and technology (pp. 158–59). She further emphasizes, “There are . . . no programs whose purpose is to prepare people from outside the academy for presidencies . . . the emphasis of process, often at the expense of outcome, will be foreign and often frustrating” (p. 165). I have not been able to identify research that describes specific process variants for nontraditional candidates or for the liberal arts, and also how nontraditional presidents experienced the process. Chapter 7 describes lessons learned from nontraditional liberal arts presidents’ selection process.

Executive search firms are relevant today because they are used in the vast majority of college president searches, but this was not always so. The advent of executive search firms in higher education can be traced back to the 1970s with the creation of the Academy of Education of Development and Academic Search Consultation Service (Mottram, 1983). Their influence grew and, by the late 1980s, Goldsmith (1989) found that private universities (64%) were more likely to use executive search firms than public universities (40%) were (as cited in Turpin, 2012, p. 32). McLaughlin and Riesman (1990) identified five types of search firms that get involved in presidential searches, “not-for-profit search firms, corporate search firms with sidelines, not-for-profit work, small specialty firms, and individuals who regularly or occasionally take on search consulting” (p. 227). The AGB (2012) highlights that most searches now involve executive search firms and that the search firms



can help organize the search process and the search committee, help develop a position profile, assist in developing a communications plan, manage nominations and applications, provide counsel to applicants, interview references, perform due diligence checks, organize candidate interviews, and advise the search committee on developing its final recommendations to the board. (p. 71)

Indeed, the trends of using executive search firms are markedly on the rise since the late 1960s to early 1980s. ACE (2012) observes, “For example, only 12 percent of presidential searches between the late 1960s and early 1980s employed a search consultant. The share of searches between 2007 and 2011 that used a search consultant was 80 percent” (para. 14). The combination of the emergence of professional search firms appearing in the late 1970s, with increasing complexity brought on by shared governance, confidentiality and open-meeting laws, and affirmative action increased the use of search firms (Lingenfelter, 2004, p. 38). Marchese (1989) more succinctly states, “At their best, consultants and firms lend speed, expertise, confidentiality and objectivity to a search process” (p. 5). Bornstein (2003) adds, “A search firm is not always necessary, but can protect a board’s independence and shield it from criticism” (loc. 3388). However, McLaughlin and Riesman (1990) caution that the use of search firms is not without its challenges, given that many search consultants’ backgrounds are not from the academy and noting, “Faculty members often view corporate search firms as belonging to the trustee’s world rather than their own” (p. 252).

It is almost a certainty that nontraditional candidates will need to familiarize themselves with executive search firms in higher education if they are to make it through initial screening processes. Search firms often write the position description, vet candidates, and make initial recommendations; and for the nontraditional candidate, search firms can provide useful context and help in understanding the process. Existing

research describing how executive search firms view nontraditional candidates is sparse and largely from periodicals and magazines. Beyond acknowledging the increasing numbers of nontraditional candidates, a number of articles comment on the challenges facing nontraditional candidates (*Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Education*). A representative article quoting Jean Dowdall of Witt Kieffer summarizes,

Nontraditional candidates face initial questions of credibility. . . . What do they know about higher education? Are they going to bring assumptions about this college as a business as opposed to an educational institution? . . . The candidates' willingness to respect the academic process, which is a relatively slower process than business, are the kinds of issues [nontraditional candidates] face. (Bowman, 2011, p. 16)

Thus, executive search firms are unquestionably important and relevant in the vast majority of presidential search processes today. Nevertheless, little has been written and researched about their views on the definition of a nontraditional president, nontraditional president search trends, what types of institutions hire nontraditional presidents, or what nontraditional candidates can do to improve their chances. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 analyze search firm executives' views on these exact topics.

#### **4. The assessment of fit in the selection and transition process**

The notion of fit between an organization and an individual has been broadly studied in the literature, and it can be broadly summarized as the compatibility between a person and an organization, as measured by the congruence between an organization's structure and processes and an employee's need, and the coherence between a person's values and personality and an organization's culture, norms, and climate (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Cable & Judge, 1994; Kristoff, 1996; Turpin, 2012, p. 15). There is broad agreement in the literature that the notion of "fit" in a college presidency setting is important and that fit in this context is a subjective measure of the compatibility between

an individual and an institution (Arthur & Kram, 1989). The multiple reasons why fit is important include increased likelihood of retention and avoidance of an expensive and embarrassing presidential derailing; higher satisfaction both personally and professionally for the president; improved outcomes and success for the institution; and less disruption to the institution (Cohen & March, 1986; Fisher & Koch, 1996; McLaughlin & Riesman, 1990; McLaughlin, 1996; Pierce, 2011; Sanaghan et al., 2008; Trachtenberg et al., 2013). Clearly, fit is a two-way process although its importance and emphasis is often seen from the vantage point of the institution's and role's needs.

Pre-presidential career pathways represent decision points where candidates and institutions have made multiple decisions about fit. It is in the final ascension to a presidency where the two-way dance of fit plays out between candidate and institution. After the institutional context is understood, the desired role and qualifications of the president agreed upon, and the selection process (including its committee and search firm) in place with a roster of traditional and nontraditional candidates, the most critical—and perhaps most subjective—step is to select the president with the best fit for the challenge. Given the shortening tenures of presidents, and many high-profile failures, selecting a president where there is good fit and success is difficult and often not achieved (Fisher, 1996; McLaughlin & Riesman, 1990; McLaughlin, 1996; Pierce, 2011; Sanaghan et al., 2008; Trachtenberg et al., 2013). Fisher and Koch (1996) bluntly put it this way, “In most institutions today, the search process is fundamentally flawed. Either a good committee is doing the wrong things, or a poorly constituted committee is doing the right things. In either case, the next president is a compromise” (p. 275). McLaughlin (1996) observes that early exits in failed presidencies can be grouped into three

categories: “admissions mistakes” where the suitability of the candidates’ intrinsic abilities are questioned; “industrial accidents” where events at an institution spiraled out of control; and “irreconcilable differences” in relationships between the president and stakeholders (pp. 10–11). Of these, the first and third categories clearly relate to fit.

Given the diversity of colleges, and the universe of candidates, clearly there is no absolute standard or formula to determine fit, as ultimately it is in the eyes of the beholder. McLaughlin and Riesman (1990) argue that there is no one way of determining fit and that “leadership is always contextual” (p. 306). Pierce (2011) argues for the importance of fit and notes that every search committee is trying to understand fit with culture, values, and style. As she writes, “Because every campus has its own culture, its own traditions, even its own idiosyncrasies, the notion of fit is real” (loc. 2930). AGB (2012) lays out the responsibilities for the board and search committee and provides checklists of duties. Fisher and Koch (1996) spell out a detailed weekly checklist for the search process and lament that the shared governance nature of the search process has become more important than the outcome itself. Bornstein (2003) adds that the search committee’s composition is critical to ensuring fit and that the search process gains the legitimacy it requires from the constituencies expecting representation (loc. 3394).

There are several things candidates can do to increase the likelihood of fit as seen by the institution. Pierce (2011) cites well-written cover letters, tailored CVs, campus visits, quality references, thorough preparation, astute and culturally sensitive answers during interviews, and judicious use of search executives, among others. Bornstein (2003) articulates that the search process should be an opportunity for the candidate to gain an understanding of an institution’s history, values, and goals as well as the

expectations of various constituencies, and suggests that candidates put everything on the table to ensure transparency and the best possibility for fit.

A search process is a two-way street with candidates determining if they want the institution, and the institution assessing their needs, which vary from one search and institution to another (McLaughlin & Reisman, 1990; Moody, 1997). Duke and Iwanicki suggest that fit may be a function of the expectations of the candidate and the institution; lack of fit can occur when the expectations of stakeholders, which can vary from one group to another, are not met (p. 28). Sometimes “fit goes beyond meeting the real job expectations and includes personal characteristics, such as . . . socioeconomic, educational, or cultural background” (p. 32). Duke and Iwanicki argue that sometimes the

expectations of various stakeholders are so thoroughly incompatible that effective leadership is an impossibility . . . but that candidates can nonetheless try to influence the perceptions of fit and make necessary adjustments if they at least acknowledge the existence of fit and try to understand it. (p. 35)

Far less has been written about how individual presidential candidates should approach the process of understanding whether a particular presidency is a good fit for them, whether it will fulfill their hopes and dreams, and be compatible with their personal and professional profile, strengths, and weaknesses. In seeking to understand the institution fully, candidates need not only to assess whether they are a good fit for the institution, but also whether the institution is a good fit for them. In so doing, candidates need to assess candidly whether they are seeking the presidency for the right reasons (Trachtenberg et al., 2013). If well done, the search process can accurately ascertain fit, create a solid transition, and dramatically enhance the legitimacy of the new president. Munding (1982), in a study of independent college presidents, cautions that candidates need to assess fit carefully because, “in some situations[,] the desire to become a

president is so intense that it interferes with good judgment” (p. 45). Barbara Moody (1997) provides a framework with seven elements of fit that should be considered from the point of view of the candidate: personal conditions, expectations, and motivations; president’s job; timing and readiness; institutional characteristics and setting; fit with institutional needs and expectations; cultural compatibility and fit with institutional culture; and interpersonal chemistry and fit with institutional members (pp. 49, 52).

Although presidential searches are competitive and known generally to have several candidates with the qualifications necessary to do the job, it is nevertheless important for strong candidates to understand that they are also a “buyer” and therefore need to explore each opportunity thoroughly. Suggestions on how to do so are limited. It is equally clear that there is no one definition of “the right fit” and that fit is a deeply personal consideration. Moody (1997), in researching how 15 college and university presidents assessed fit as candidates, concluded: (1) that candidates looked for different areas of fit particular to them and that when it was deemed good enough a turning point occurred; (2) that the desire for the presidency and its prestige often overshadowed the evaluation of fit, and that in cases where fit was known to be low, that some candidates thought they could overcome it once in office; (3) that some aspects of the process, such as lack of confidentiality or too broad participation actually inhibited an authentic assessment of fit; (4) that candidates benefitted from multiple search experiences that honed their ability to assess fit; and (5) that those candidates who had a sense of strong fit during the process were more likely to have a positive experience thereafter (pp. 165–72).

Little has been written about how nontraditional candidates establish fit in higher education or have thought about and experienced fit in the selection process. For many

new presidents, the notion of fit is often put to the test when change is required. In a study of 15 new college presidents from a range of nontraditional and traditional backgrounds, Gregg Glover (2005) examined how new presidents approach change in the transition period and determined that there were many commonalities between nontraditional and traditional candidates, with some notable exceptions being that nontraditional candidates were more comfortable with strategic planning and traditional candidates with academic changes. There was also a notable tendency for nontraditional college presidents to pay more attention to budgetary issues since they disproportionately were recruited to turn around financially strapped institutions (pp. 167–69). Thus, understanding the context and figuring out which situations will best allow a nontraditional candidate to leverage his or her strengths appears important.

How nontraditional candidates assess fit in the selection process and subsequently have a positive transition process—specifically in the liberal arts context—is largely anecdotal. Search consultants Shelly Storbeck and Susan Frost suggest major trends at liberal arts colleges that presidential candidates must account for when assessing fit. First is a changed economic sphere catalyzed by the recession of 2008, technological discontinuities, and geo-demographic changes resulting in budget deficits, aid cuts, and rising competition for students and philanthropy. The second trend is

a growing culture clash as a younger generation of business and technology leaders, many . . . successful entrepreneurs or venture investors, step into leadership positions on higher education boards . . . for the most part, they do not favor the collaborative, incremental approaches that are a hallmark of the academy. (as cited in Chopp, 2013, loc. 1170)

Eckel (2006) suggests that nontraditional presidents may be more familiar with college boards, but face the challenge of ensuring they can bridge to the faculty. Trustee

activism and its impact on the presidency are unlikely to abate any time soon (p. 138).

The importance of fit in the selection process, and frameworks for how to think about it, from both the point of view of the selection committee and the candidate are well established. However, how nontraditional presidents—from all universities and the liberal arts in particular—have thought about and experienced fit in practice is a critical element that has not been explored. Further, little has been written about how nontraditional candidates move from a successful selection to a productive transition. Chapter 7 analyzes nontraditional presidents' experiences regarding fit and transition.

## **5. Research Design**

The research area of focus is the definition and professional pathways of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents, characteristics of the liberal arts colleges that hire nontraditional presidents, and the views of executive search firms and nontraditional presidents with respect to the liberal arts context and how nontraditional liberal arts college presidents get selected and consider fit. My research explores the challenging liberal arts context in higher education today, the relationship between aspects of this context and the number of nontraditional presidents, as well as how nontraditional presidents and search firm executives are playing a role in and experiencing this context.

### Research Questions

The research questions explored by this dissertation are:

- What is the context of stand-alone liberal arts colleges today as quantitatively profiled by institutional characteristics such as geography, religious affiliation, graduation rates, selectivity, size, and financial characteristics? By comparison, how do presidents qualitatively perceive the liberal arts context?



- What is the definition of a nontraditional liberal arts college president as seen by search executives; what are the number and pathway characteristics of today's nontraditional liberal arts college presidents; and how do the numbers compare with the Cohen and March, ACE, and Birnbaum presidential category studies?
- Given the quantitative context above, what are the institutional characteristics (i.e., religion, graduation rates, size, geography, selectivity, financial, ranking) of liberal arts colleges that hire nontraditional presidents and how do they differ from those hiring traditional presidents?
- How do search firm executives see trends in presidential searches and hiring nontraditional presidents?
- What are search executives' and presidents' views of and lessons learned for nontraditional presidents to increase their chances of selection?
- How have presidents thought about fit and what are their lessons learned in the early transition process?

To answer these questions, I have deployed a mixed-methods data-collection approach. I gathered quantitative data by building a database of the background and pathways of all current liberal arts college presidents (as of June 2014) and their predecessors (whenever the transition took place). In addition, I have captured financial, selectivity, geography, ranking, size, and religion affiliation data on each liberal arts institution. Further qualitative data has been captured via in-depth interviews of three current or recent nontraditional college presidents, one traditional president with expertise in the liberal arts, and eight executive search professionals who have conducted liberal arts college president searches in the past several years. Finally, collection and analysis of written materials related to the presidents and their colleges have provided information both pre- and post-interview.

Although a completely qualitative study might be adequate to provide insight regarding the factors that promote or impede fit of a nontraditional president in the liberal

arts context, the reason for a mixed-methods approach is to provide a quantitative and analytical fact base not only about the pathways of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents, but also about the relationship between liberal arts institutions' characteristics and context and the type of president sought. The ACE On the Pathway to the Presidency report (2013) provides only a sampling across all colleges and universities and no complete perspective on the liberal arts. Statistical analysis on the database will explain which types of institutions are most likely to hire nontraditional presidents. The fact base will also allow for an accurate characterization of the liberal arts colleges context overall. To my knowledge, there is no database or analysis of the number of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents, nor information on their pathways. A qualitative approach will help to clarify, compare, and contrast definitions; explain how different stakeholders (i.e., the executive search firm, and the nontraditional presidents) view the liberal arts context and search processes involving nontraditional presidents; compare the view of those responsible for placing liberal arts college presidents with the quantitative fact base of existing presidents and their predecessors; and clarify factors that drive fit.

To clearly delimit the definition of a liberal arts institution, the research uses as its sample size the 248 stand-alone liberal arts colleges as defined by USNWR in its Compass database as of June 2014—a subscription source that I purchased. The rationale for this is that USNWR is a commonly recognized source. Second, while many larger universities have liberal arts colleges as part of the institution, the research focuses on the challenges of liberal arts institutions as stand-alone entities led by a president. Although there are other classification systems such as Carnegie that include liberal arts colleges as part of other categories such as baccalaureate colleges, the merit of USNWR is that it is a

clean list and it is well recognized and used. The Annapolis Group list is smaller than that of USNWR. I rejected it so as to increase the sample size, thereby increasing the potential number of nontraditional presidents that could be studied. Further, USNWR provides ranking and a variety of other characteristic data for each institution such as geography and religion, which can be cross-tabulated with other public sources of quantitative data such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

To be able to characterize the liberal arts colleges collectively and to segment them along various dimensions to illustrate their diverse starting points and trends, I gathered an array of quantitative data on each stand-alone liberal arts institution. First, basic data is being captured by institution from the USNWR college database, as well as from IPEDS, including graduation rate, geography, religious affiliation, size as measured by total staff, total instructional staff, total expenses and number of students (in-state and out-of-state), selectivity as measured by acceptance rate and yield, and ranking. Second, financial data on each institution's endowment and endowment per full-time equivalent (FTE) student is being captured from IPEDS. Third, list price tuition and fees (in-state and out-of-state), net tuition revenue and fees (total and per student FTE), the tuition discount rate, total revenues, total core expenses, total and average amount of institutional grant aid received and percentage of undergraduates receiving aid, percentage of full-pay students, and tuition dependency, among others, are captured or derived from IPEDS. I captured the data for the year 2012–2013, as it is the last complete year in IPEDS for which data is available as of January 2015, and I also captured it for 2007–2008 to allow for trend analysis leading up to the current context.

A complete summary of the variables, their definitions, and the sources I used is summarized in Appendix D.

Chapter 2 summarizes the liberal arts colleges quantitatively when considered as a whole and subsequently analyzes the current context facing liberal arts college presidents by examining the colleges along each of the segmentation variables. Given the financial challenges faced by presidents that have been further amplified by the crisis, I probe and illustrate trends from 2008 to 2013 via a few case studies of liberal arts colleges in substantially different circumstances. By factually quantifying and characterizing liberal arts along several segmentation dimensions in Chapter 2, the research sets the stage for determining what type of liberal arts college is more or less likely to hire a nontraditional president in Chapter 5.

Despite common use of the word *nontraditional*, there is not one uniform definition of what a nontraditional president is. As such, I have gathered quantitative data to allow for analysis of how many nontraditional liberal arts college presidents there are via different definitions: the ACE methodology, the Birnbaum categories (scholar, steward, spanner, and stranger), and the Beardsley definition. Thus, the methodology attempts to gather data on a sample of 248 current liberal arts college presidents, as well as the 248 predecessors. I captured quantitative data via Internet searches on presidential biographies to allow for the determination of how many presidents meet these definitions. To test the relevance of the various quantitative definitions, I asked search executives to define a nontraditional president to see if there is a de facto consensus on what the term means.

One focus of the quantitative research is to provide specific liberal arts president data and, as such, provide a useful comparison between the liberal arts colleges and the broader higher education landscape of the ACE and Birnbaum methodologies that do not provide specific liberal arts college data. However, the quantitative research does not attempt to quantify how many traditional and nontraditional presidents there are for each of the various search firm executive's definitions.

The importance of the definition of a nontraditional president when interpreting results is difficult to overstate. Different definitions can lead to dramatically different conclusions. Cohen and March's original definition of a traditional president climbing an academic ladder all the way through to provost before becoming a president is an example of a definition that is among the most restrictive in becoming a traditional president and the easiest to become a nontraditional president. For instance, a tenure-track faculty member who did not achieve full tenure, or did not become a provost but did become a college president, would be considered nontraditional. By this metric, it is quite plausible that the majority of first-time presidents today already would be considered nontraditional using the ACE methodology.

By contrast, the Birnbaum methodology makes it quite easy to be considered traditional by creating the category of "steward," which accommodates anyone who has made a career in higher education despite not being faculty, in addition to the traditional track of Cohen and March. Given the fact that most liberal arts colleges now have staff who outnumber faculty by more than two to one, the net effect is that it is comparatively difficult to be considered a nontraditional. While capturing data to allow for a longitudinal comparison with the Birnbaum methodology, this research did not retain the

Birnbaum definitions of “traditional” and “nontraditional” as the standard definition for four reasons: (1) the tradition for centuries, and until the 1980s, involved the requirement to be a tenure-track faculty member. Birnbaum decided to allow nonfaculty members to be considered traditional, in effect violating tradition and expanding the definition of “traditional” very broadly; (2) after the Birnbaum study, there is no indication in the literature that his definitions led to further studies during the past two decades that quantified presidents using his terminology; (3) no search-firm executives interviewed used the language “spanner” or “steward”; and (4) certain cases run counter to common sense and long-standing convention and tradition, such as considering a tenure-track faculty member who worked for 20 years as a full professor or department chair or provost but whose last job was outside higher education “nontraditional,” yet a chief financial officer with a bachelors in accounting who has worked the past two jobs in higher education is considered “traditional.”

Versus Cohen and March, the Beardsley definition is far less restrictive in determining who is a traditional president. Thus, any president who has once been on a faculty tenure track, whether he or she achieved tenure or not, or whether he or she became provost or not, is considered to be a traditional candidate; any president who does not fulfill the traditional criteria is nontraditional. This method inherently makes it more difficult to become a nontraditional candidate versus the Cohen and March standard, since the definition of a traditional candidate is broader, while respecting the faculty tenure-track tradition. As such, the Beardsley definition analysis of how many nontraditional presidents there actually are is quite conservative. For example, if the

Beardsley definition would be adjusted to require a traditional president to have attained the rank of full tenured professor, the number of nontraditional presidents would rise.

To carry out the quantitative exercise allowing longitudinal comparability with the ACE and Birnbaum frameworks, as well as the definition adopted in this dissertation, a number of criteria are being captured in a database for each standing liberal arts president and that person's predecessor. A summary of the data-element types, detailed decision rules, and sources captured for traditional and nontraditional presidents is in Appendix C. Gathering data at this level allows for flexible and segmented definitions of traditional and nontraditional candidates, recognizing that complete biographical information for all data elements of 248 presidents and their predecessors are not available and cannot be fully coded. However, the data set allows for a very robust sample.

Nontraditional presidents may find a way to move from a total outsider status toward an insider status at a given institution by establishing their credibility with the academy or a given institution through either administrative roles in higher education, adjunct professor roles, and/or trustee roles in higher education. To further be able to conduct descriptive statistics analyses, I captured a number of other variables and markers for nontraditional presidents to describe better the pathways of nontraditional candidates leading to a liberal arts college presidency. For instance, whether a doctorate has been earned, whether the president is an alumnus/a, whether the president has previously worked for the college or been a trustee, and whether the president has been a professor in a non-tenure-track role are variables that indicate more of an "insider" status. Total absence of these markers would be an indication of "an outsider" or total stranger.

For nontraditional presidents as defined by this quantitative research, these variables provide better insight into the characteristics of nontraditional presidents.

Chapter 4 compares search firm executives' definitions of nontraditional presidents with the ACE, Birnbaum, Cohen and March, and Beardsley definitions. Chapter 4 further quantifies and compares the number of nontraditional liberal arts presidents per the ACE, Birnbaum, and Beardsley definitions. I examine and analyze further characteristics of nontraditional presidents such as gender, terminal degree attainment, or college affiliation.

The rationale for collecting both institutional quantitative data and individual president data is that it will be possible to characterize the religious, geographic, ranking, selectivity, graduation, and financial context in which liberal arts schools are operating (Chapter 2) and the type of president selected (Chapter 4). These facts can then be cross-analyzed with the presence (or not) of nontraditional presidents to see if there is any meaningful statistical relationship between context as measured by specific institutional characteristics and the presence of a nontraditional president, and to test the hypothesis that less selective, more financially challenged, and religiously affiliated institutions are more likely to hire nontraditional presidents. Linking Chapters 2 and 4 together, Chapter 5 considers what type of liberal arts college hires a nontraditional president.

I gathered the quantitative presidential data manually through extensive Internet searches. A data gatherer, Axel Olson, a senior at Tufts University, helped gather some of the manual data from the Internet. For the avoidance of doubt, he is an independent and has no relationship with the researcher's current employer, McKinsey & Company, or future employer, University of Virginia. Olson was given a written, structured data



request (Appendix B) specifying the categories of data to be gathered for presidential pathway data variables previously outlined, as well as the institutional data variables. I augmented this request subsequently by email and verbal requests, which resulted in the variable descriptions found in Appendices C and D. For the presidential pathway data, the primary source of data was presidential biographical information posted on the institutional websites, gleaned from announcements, or posted as public information on the Internet. This information has all been coded into a master Excel database spreadsheet on presidential pathways.

For institutional data, I specified the data variables to be gathered, and associated definitional decision rules; instructed Olson to gather data for the variables specified from a combination of USNWR Compass and IPEDS; and asked that he place it in an Excel database. The two databases were linked by the name of the liberal arts college so that cross-analysis could be conducted. The net result of the quantitative data gathering exercise is a master dataset from which I have conducted subsequent analysis. Of the 248 liberal arts colleges, the data set is quite robust. For most variables, more than 95% of the sample is reported. In certain cases there is missing data, either because the institution didn't report the variable into IPEDS or because certain presidential biographical information (particularly for the preceding generation of presidents) is not available from Internet searches.

The primary components of the qualitative research are search firm executive and liberal arts college president interviews. These qualitative interviews complement the quantitative component of the research and allow testing of whether what is observed in the quantitative data is perceived and experienced in practice.

The number of executive search consultants interviewed was eight. The rationale for interviewing eight professionals is that this provides adequate insight into how they have experienced the nontraditional liberal arts college presidential candidate phenomenon, but as few as five could have proven adequate; the final number was determined by access and availabilities. It is also squarely in the range recommended by Creswell (2013) for a phenomenological group that has collectively experienced the phenomenon (loc. 1706). Collectively they will have significant insight into their experiences surrounding the definition of nontraditional candidates, selection process, perceptions, and the factors that both impede and promote the success of a nontraditional presidency.

In order to determine which executive search firm executives with related liberal arts experience should be interviewed, I conducted a detailed Internet search on recent liberal arts college president searches to determine which search firms are most active in presidential searches. This involved examining *Inside Higher Ed* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* postings, talking to several higher education executives about which search firms they use, asking McKinsey & Company's human resources and talent department about which search firms are knowledgeable in the learning and higher education arena, interviewing Judith McLaughlin of Harvard's New College President program, and conducting extensive Google searches on executive search and college presidencies. I also know several search firms personally. I identified and contacted the search firms by telephone or email. The main criterion for being selected was experience in liberal arts president searches and not the specific searches of the nontraditional presidents under study.

In total, I considered eight executive search firms: Isaacson Miller, Storbeck Pimentel, Spencer Stuart, Heidrick & Struggles, Korn Ferry, AGB Search, Russell Reynolds, and Witt Kiefer. Collectively, these search firms are known to conduct a high number of searches in the business. I then identified a purposeful sample of 12 executives from across these search firms with whom I had potential access through direct or indirect contacts. In certain cases I approached more than one executive from the same firm, given that their experiences have allowed them to conduct different searches and to develop their own point of view.

For nontraditional presidents, I examined a purposeful sample of three nontraditional presidents with various backgrounds. The rationale for three nontraditional presidents is that they are serving as a basis of triangulation of insight versus the executive search firm interviews and quantitative research. Further, they provide insight as to how they have experienced and view the liberal arts context and being a nontraditional president. Collectively they will have significant insight into their pathways, how they experienced the selection process and role of search firms, which aspects of their nontraditional backgrounds helped or hindered them, perspectives on the liberal arts context and trends, how they thought about fit, and advice for nontraditional candidates.

In order to establish the purposeful sample of nontraditional presidents to be interviewed, I used a pragmatic approach. First, I examined the quantitative database to see which nontraditional presidents or their predecessors exist. In parallel, I asked a set of very short qualitative questions of professors such as Dr. Robert Zemsky, Dr. Matthew Hartley, Dr. Mary-Linda Armacost, and Dr. Judith McLaughlin, as well as several

executive search firm executives, McKinsey & Company colleagues, and University of Pennsylvania classmates to identify more quickly possible nontraditional liberal arts college presidents who might be willing to be interviewed. I established a list of 10 nontraditional presidents and approached three from comparatively different backgrounds and institutions. I also approached one traditional president. Four accepted, of which three are nontraditional and one traditional.

### Negotiating Access

To negotiate access, I approached each search executive and president either directly or through someone who knew them using a combination of phone calls and initial email outreach explaining the research. An example of the initial email is shown in Appendix A. Once a search executive or president informally indicated willingness to participate in the research, I sent a formal email including IRB consent forms for signature. In positioning and carrying out the interviews, I have bracketed my own experience in nontraditional presidential searches consistent with the phenomenological research method of Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2012, loc. 1736–47).

The following eight search executives have provided consent and participated in the research: (1) John Isaacson—Isaacson, Miller; (2) Shelly Storbeck—Storbeck Pimentel; (3) David Bellshaw—Isaacson Miller; (4) Sue May—Storbeck Pimentel; (5) Anne Coyle—Storbeck Pimentel; (6) Ken Kring—Korn Ferry; (7) Ellen Landers—Heidrick & Struggles; and (8) Jackie Zavitz—Korn Ferry. Collectively, they have more than 100 years of search experience across hundreds of searches.

The following three nontraditional liberal arts college presidents have provided consent and participated in the research: (1) John Fry of Franklin & Marshall (now

president of Drexel); (2) Larry Schall of Oglethorpe College; and (3) David Greene of Colby College. The institutions they represent have diversity of geography, size, and ranking, and each nontraditional president has a different pathway experience, although none were total strangers to higher education preceding their inauguration as president.

In addition, as a further source of insight and triangulation as to the liberal arts context, the definition of nontraditional presidents, trends in selection processes, how to think about fit between candidate and context, and advice for nontraditional presidents, I approached an expert with a long history in higher education and the liberal arts. Dr. William Bowen, former president of Princeton and a recognized expert on higher education and the liberal arts, kindly agreed to be interviewed. Although Bowen is a traditional president, Princeton has a strong liberal arts tradition, and his expertise and research has focused on the liberal arts. He was interviewed for 90 minutes following the same process as that for a nontraditional president.

In addition to the email exchanges positioning the research, and any verbal conversation preceding the research, I performed an Internet search on the background, biography, and various publications or interviews each search executive or president may have conducted on the topic. Additionally, the quantitative database was consulted for any institutionally relevant data. For the presidents, I culled more recent information about current context facing the college from college websites and reviewed various ranking and college overview books such as USNWR or the Franken's (2013) *Princeton Guide to the Top 378 Colleges*, among others, as appropriate. I developed a brief summary prior to each interview. My review of these written materials ensured that I

was as well prepared as possible for the interviews and allowed for deeper probing of context as interviews unfolded with each of the interviewees.

The format of each interview was a one-hour to 90-minute phone call or in-person interview that was recorded by using a Dictaphone. Each search executive and president has been informed in writing and verbally that the conversation was being recorded and that a transcription would be provided to them for final edits. Each interviewee signed a consent form authorizing the recording, transcription, and subsequent use in the dissertation as per Appendix A. I conducted the interviews in the August to early November 2014 time frame.

In the interviews, I examined and probed how search executives have experienced the phenomenon of nontraditional liberal arts college presidential candidates in the search process. Specifically, for the search executives, the interview format was a series of open-ended questions that I asked about the definition of nontraditional presidents, the liberal arts context, strengths and challenges of nontraditional candidates in the search process, views of the types of liberal arts colleges that hire a nontraditional president, and advice for nontraditional candidates.

To encourage a narrative response, the interview format with presidents was a series of open-ended questions that examined and probed how nontraditional liberal arts college presidents have experienced and view the liberal arts context, how they thought about the search process, finding the right fit, and getting off to a good start during the transition. Further, they shared their lessons learned for nontraditional candidates in a search process.

To stimulate spontaneous responses, I did not share the questions in advance. In an impromptu fashion, I asked additional clarifying questions beyond the protocol in each interview depending on previous responses. The basic interview protocol followed during the interviews is shown in Appendix A.

Once an interview was conducted, the recording was sent to an external transcription firm, GMR Transcription. GMR provides confidential transcription for a service fee. Once transcribed over a roughly one-week period, the transcripts were sent to me. I proofread the transcript while listening to the original recording and made corrections as necessary. Additionally, where the interviewee requested certain verbal material not be included in the published research, these quotes were specifically highlighted and bracketed for the interviewee to see. Once I proofread and corrected the transcript, it was sent to the interviewee for final approval. The interviewee had the opportunity to correct, delete, or add to any comments on the transcript and then sent it back to me if he or she had any changes. Each interview followed this process.

### Coding

For the search firm executive interviews, I examined a few major areas of inquiry: the liberal arts context currently; the definition of a nontraditional president; viewpoints on nontraditional candidates in the search process; and experience as to the type of liberal arts college that hires a nontraditional candidate. For the nontraditional president interviews, I considered a few major areas of inquiry: the liberal arts context currently and in the future; experiences that point to how to improve success in the search process; finding the right fit; and lessons learned on transitions. For each question area, I coded and grouped responses across interviewees by excerpting replies into “significant

statements” and then broader themes or “meaning units” (Creswell, loc. 1720). The coding highlighted any areas of disagreement or ambiguity.

Data gathering from both a qualitative and quantitative point of view has followed a deliberate sequencing. The first phase was the design and construction of the quantitative database that was completed in early September. The institutional data was then updated in December and January with newer IPEDS data for 2012–2013. The search firm executive interviews took place from late August through October, a time frame that allowed me to be better informed given the emerging database—for example, knowing how many nontraditional presidents there are. The presidential interviews took place in October and November, allowing for a maximum amount of preparation and context from both the database and the search executive interviews.

Any research has inherent limitations, and this dissertation is no exception. Limitations of this research and the validity of findings are explored in detail in Appendix E. The discussion examines issues such as sample size, my positionality, and how triangulation is used between the different data components.

At a high level, there are three components to the research: (1) a database; (2) executive search firm interviews; and (3) four college president interviews, of which three are nontraditional. The database provides a fact-based understanding of the liberal arts landscape from a variety of financial, selectivity, outcome, and institutional characteristic variable angles, including trend data. The current context, difficult for many of the institutions, is clear from the data and covered in Chapter 2. The database on the liberal arts college presidents’ pathways and backgrounds allows determination of whether they are nontraditional or not, how many nontraditional presidents there are, and



comparison with other studies, and is covered in Chapter 4. The pathways information is linked to the financial and institutional characteristic database via the name of the institution. Chapter 5 examines what type of liberal arts institution hires a nontraditional president by analytically combining the segmentation characteristics of the liberal arts institutions explored in Chapter 2 with the presidential pathway data of chapter 4.

A key thread and integration mechanism between the database and the nontraditional president interviews are the qualitative interviews with the executive search consultants and the college presidents. Integration happens at several levels across the three sources of data. First, Chapter 3 outlines how the college presidents experience and view the context of liberal arts colleges as compared to the quantitative context analysis in Chapter 2. Second, Chapter 4 compares the search firm executives' definitions of nontraditional presidents with those in the literature and the definition used in this research. Third, search firm executives' points of view on what type of liberal arts college hires a nontraditional president are compared to the quantitative database findings in Chapter 5. Fourth, search firm executives' experiences and views on nontraditional president search trends are spelled out in Chapter 6. Fifth, Chapter 7 outlines the point of view of search firm executives as to what helps a nontraditional presidential candidate succeed in a selection process as compared to the experiences of the presidents themselves. Finally, Chapter 8 shares presidents' experiences and viewpoints on thinking about fit and making a good transition, bringing to life the reality of their experiences.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Liberal Arts Colleges' Quantitative Characteristics, Context, and Trends**

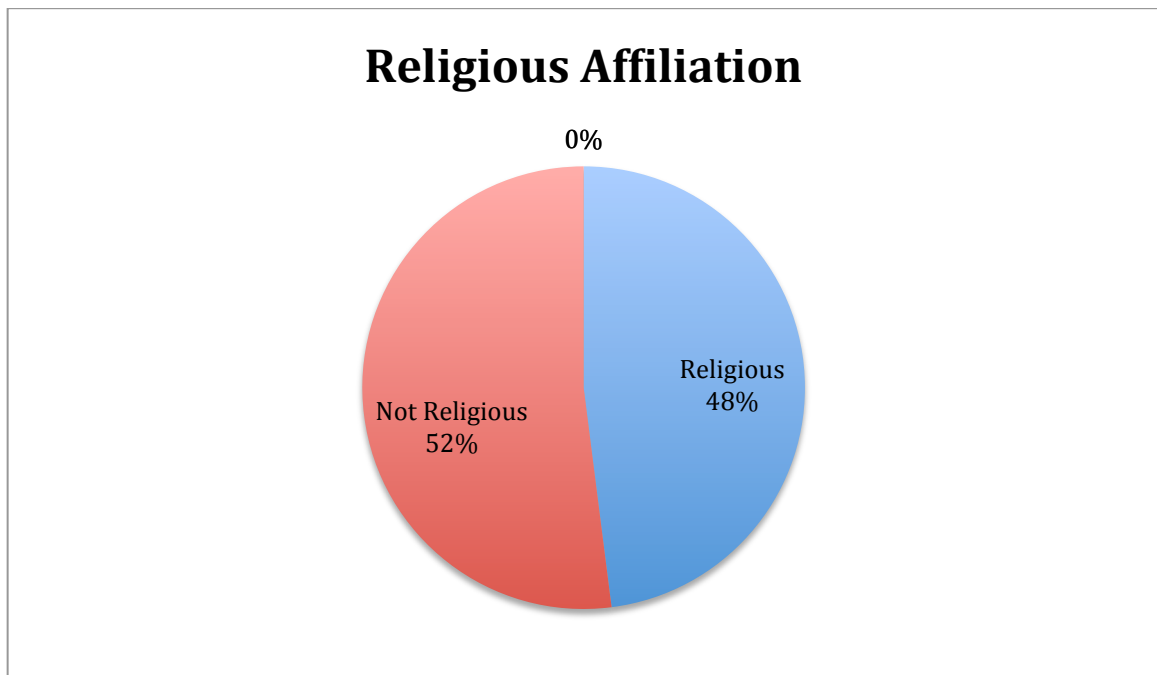
There is no one typical liberal arts college. The overall landscape and segmentation of liberal arts colleges varies dramatically along several different segmentation dimensions including: religious affiliation, graduation rate, public or private, size, selectivity, financial situation, ranking, and geography. The 248 liberal arts colleges' contexts are analyzed along each of these dimensions, as differences in position affect the context in which a president must operate and, in certain cases, could influence the likelihood of a nontraditional president being selected. For instance, a difficult financial context, or a lower-ranked college might lead to a greater propensity to have a nontraditional president. Chapter 5 subsequently takes each of these segmentation dimensions and examines whether they result in explaining the likelihood of the presence of a nontraditional president. In addition, I examine salient trends during the past five years to define further the context in which liberal arts presidents have been recently operating.

#### **1. Religious affiliation: still common among liberal arts colleges**

Whether it was the Quakers founding Earlham College, or Presbyterians founding Davidson College, or the Roman Catholic Church founding College of the Holy Cross, many liberal arts colleges have a religious affiliation. At some colleges the affiliation may still be strong, yet others may have reduced the oversight and governance by a given church while maintaining core values. Yet others—such as Grinnell College, Bates College, or the United States Air Force Academy—have no religious affiliation whatsoever.

Using USNWR religious affiliation data, 119 out of 248 liberal arts colleges—or 48%—have a religious affiliation (Illustration 1). Religious affiliation is an example of a factor that could potentially affect the type of president selected, as a given institution could grant preference to candidates from that church. In non-religiously-affiliated colleges, this would almost certainly not be the case.

Illustration 1



Source: USNWR 2014

## **2. Graduation outcomes: liberal arts colleges are above average**

Given the increasing cost of higher education, and the fact that the liberal arts is one of the more expensive forms of higher education, it is not surprising that increasing attention is being paid by everyone—from the Obama administration to families to students taking out loans—to outcomes. One of the more important and basic forms of outcome is the graduation rate. According to NCES (2013), the Student Right to Know Act of 1990 requires colleges and universities to report the percentage of students that

complete their program within 150 percent of the normal time for completion, which is within 6 years for students pursuing a bachelor's degree. Students who transfer and complete a degree at another institution are not included as completers in these rates.

(n.d.)

By this metric, according to NCES, the 2012 graduation rate for higher education overall was 59%. Liberal arts colleges perform well above this with an average graduation rate of 65.5% and a median graduation rate of 68% (Table 1). However, there is wide variation in performance, as shown by the standard deviation of 19.8%. Amherst and Pomona, for example, have a graduation rate of 96%, whereas Granite State College and East-West University have graduation rates of 9% and 11%.

**Table 1. Bachelor's Degree within Six Years—Total 2012–2013**

Statistic (n=244)	2012–2013 six-year graduation rate (%)
Mean	65.5
Median	68
Standard Deviation	19.8
Range	9 to 96

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Research by Robert Zemsky et al. (2001) has shown that graduation rate is also a critical differentiating variable to determine different segments of higher education institutions. Various levels of six-year graduation rates determine these segments. The segments, rank-ordered from best graduation rate to lowest graduation rate, are called medallion, name-brand, good- buy, and good-opportunity colleges. It is plausible that the different levels of graduation rates relate to a context that could result in varying

likelihoods to hire a nontraditional president. For instance, higher graduation rates could be indicative of a higher academic standard that translates into a higher propensity for a traditional academic profile as president. Applying the Zemsky (2001) segmentation criteria to liberal arts colleges provides a meaningful, and broadly similarly sized segment distribution, outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2. Segmentation of Liberal Arts Colleges According to Six-Year Graduation Rate Thresholds**

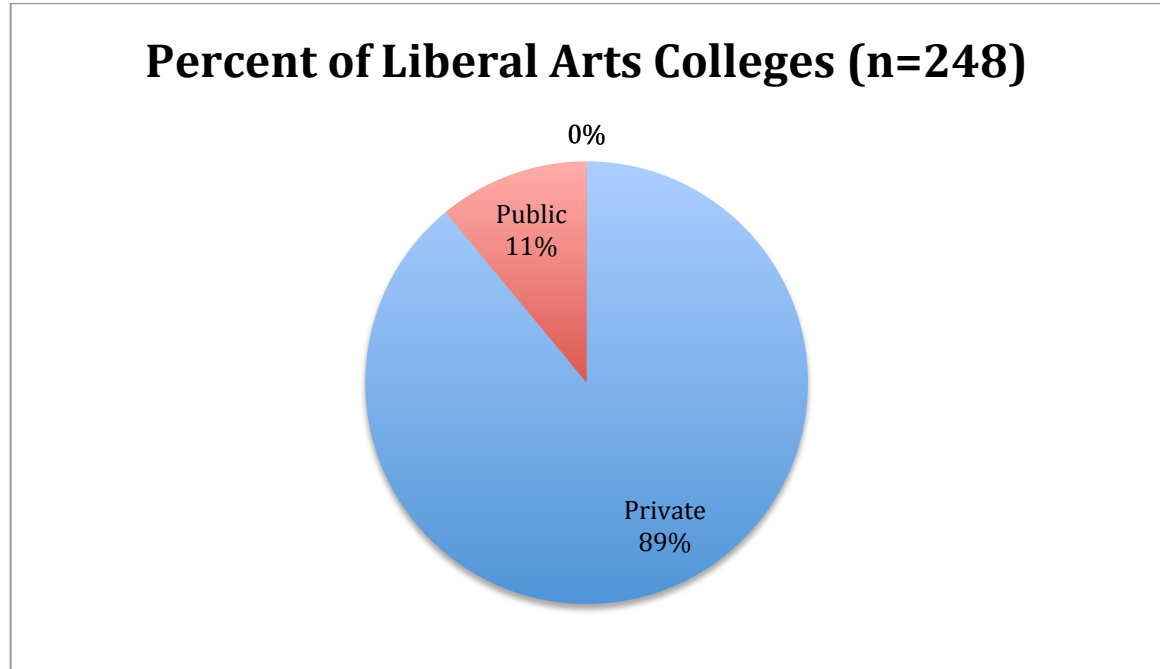
<b>Higher Education Institution Segment Name (graduation rate % thresholds)</b>	<b>Number of Liberal Arts Colleges 2012–2013 (N=244)</b>
Medallion ( $GR \geq 80\%$ );	66
Name Brand ( $68 \leq GR < 80$ )	60
Good Buy ( $50 \leq GR < 68$ )	66
Good Opportunity ( $20 \leq GR < 50$ )	46
Does Not Meet Segmentation Minimum Threshold ( $GR < 20\%$ )	6

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data; Zemsky et al. (2001)

### **3. Public vs. private: the vast majority of liberal arts colleges are private**

Although many public universities offer liberal arts programs, or even honors colleges that compete with stand-alone liberal arts colleges, there are very few public liberal arts colleges. Eighty-nine percent of liberal arts colleges are private (Illustration 2). Some notable liberal arts colleges such as the United States Military Academy at West Point, the University of Hawaii–Hilo, or New College of Florida are examples of public liberal arts colleges. It is unclear how being private versus a public institution might affect the selection of a college president.

Illustration 2



Source: USNWR Compass 2014 data

#### **4. Size: liberal arts colleges are highly varied**

There are many different variables that can be used to consider the size of a liberal arts college, including the number of students, the number of employees, the number of faculty, the revenue received from tuition, or the expenses. However, all of the measures reveal that there are wide variations in the size of a liberal arts college, making broad generalizations dangerous. Taken as a collective, liberal arts colleges are about the size of a Fortune 500 company with annual expenses of almost \$14 billion, more than 430,000 students, and more than 100,000 employees. But they clearly punch above that weight given the impact they have on so many lives. Their longevity, which outstrips most companies, speaks to their importance and relevance over time. A summary overview of the total liberal arts college landscape is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3. Liberal Arts Colleges 2012–2013 Overall Landscape by the Numbers**

Size Dimension of Liberal Arts Colleges	Total
Number of Students; 12-Month Full-time Equivalent FTE (n=245)	432,256
Number of Employees (FTE); n=245	105,616
Faculty: Total Instructional Staff on 9-, 10-, 11- or 12-month contract; (FTE) n=243	31,042
Revenue from Tuition and Fees; (\$) n=246	7,201,775,871
Core Expenses; (\$) n=245	14,180,770,282

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

*Student Enrollments in Liberal Arts Colleges Vary Widely, Represent a Small Fraction of the US Higher Education Population*

The total number of 12-month, FTE students enrolled in the 245 liberal arts colleges (for which FTE enrollment data is available for the 2012–2013 period from IPEDS) is 432,256. Thus, stand-alone liberal arts colleges educate but a small fraction of the higher education student population in the United States. Sixty-two colleges have FTE enrollments of less than 1,000 students, and 47 colleges have more than 2,500 students. The smallest liberal arts college is Sterling College in Craftsbury Common, Vermont, with 93 students; and Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction, Colorado, is the largest with 7,671 students—more than 80 times bigger. The median size is 1,647 at Washington College. An overview of enrollment size for the liberal arts colleges is summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4. 2012–2013 Enrollment Size for Liberal Arts Colleges**

Size of Liberal Arts College (FTE); n=245	Number of Students
Mean	1764
Median	1647
Range	93 to 7,671
Total	432,256

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

*Faculty and Staff: Varies Almost 80-fold across Institutions*

Each liberal arts institution is a stand-alone enterprise in its own right and provides a lot of its services in-house. Some decide to outsource certain functions such as catering or information technology functions, potentially moving employment numbers from the payroll to an expense item on the income statement. Faculty status ranges from tenured faculty to adjunct professors. Virtually all institutions report how many FTE employees they have and how many faculty are on a nine- to 12-month contract. The total number of FTE employees in liberal arts institutions (excluding outsourcing) is just under 106,000. However, the number of staff and faculty per institution varies almost 80-fold. An overview of staff and faculty at liberal arts colleges is shown in Table 5.



**Table 5. 2012–2013 Total Number of Staff and Faculty at Liberal Arts Colleges**

Statistic	Total FTE Staff; n=244	Faculty: Total Instructional Staff on 9-, 10-, 11-, or 12-month contract (FTE); n=242
Mean	433	128
Median	371	113
Standard Deviation	271	77
Range	21 to 1650	5 to 393
Total	105,616	31,042

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

The smallest liberal arts college, as measured by total staff, is Thomas More College of the Liberal Arts at 21, and the three largest liberal arts colleges are Bucknell, the University of Richmond, and the United States Military Academy at the top with 1,650 employees. The median of 371 is represented by Central College with 368 and the University of Minnesota–Morris with 374 employees. Some liberal arts colleges are the size of a small business and some the size of a medium business. However, in total the liberal arts remains a small employer compared to large companies. UPS (2015), by contrast, has 344,200 employees in the United States alone.

Although the numbers and variation of total employees and faculty show broadly similar variation patterns, the number of faculty may be a more relevant metric to examine for the type of president selected. This is because liberal arts colleges have a strong culture of shared governance, and faculty have a de facto veto on any presidential candidate. Further, liberal arts colleges with a larger number of faculty like Bucknell, or the University of Richmond at 393, may have a broader pipeline of internal candidates, or more complex shared governance given the difficulty of knowing all the faculty by name. This might make it more difficult for a nontraditional candidate to be selected.

The size of the institution could be a relevant consideration when selecting a college president as it relates to the complexity of the institution. Some liberal arts colleges, such as the University of Richmond, have several schools and much larger enrollments and budgets, leading to greater complexity and larger number of faculty. Smaller colleges are very focused, have smaller budgets, and unless well endowed could be subscale and facing difficulty.

Of further note is that there are, on average, almost 2.4 staff for every faculty member. As colleges have grown in complexity, so have the number of staff. Besides increasing cost, an indirect consequence of this is that there are more administrators that are familiar with the challenges facing higher education than there used to be. This experience can help them to attain a sort of insider status and be compelling presidential candidates, even if they are not traditional candidates with a tenure-track faculty pedigree.

## **5. Selectivity: ranging from the very elite to open admission**

Every fall parents and their about-to-graduate high school children worry about what college will accept their college application. The reality is that there is a large choice and that competition exists at two levels. The first level of competition is to get admitted. At some schools this is easy or virtually guaranteed, and at more elite institutions it is highly selective; their reputations attract far more applicants than spots available. The second level of competition is reversed, whereby students that have been admitted decide which school they want to attend, and colleges compete to attract the students they have admitted. The percentage of students that accept a given college's offer of admission is called the yield rate. Given that students are unsure if they will get

admitted, or are shopping for the best overall deal and fit, many students apply to multiple schools, and significant numbers of applicants to 10 or more. For many liberal arts colleges, this can translate into low yield rates and a struggle to “make the class.”

Liberal arts institutions range from the most highly selective—such as the United States Naval Academy, which in 2012 accepted 6.8% of applicants—to open admission at many. Fourteen liberal arts colleges accepted less than 20% of applicants and 31 colleges accepted 80% or more of applicants. The most elite liberal arts colleges compete toe-to-toe with famous private universities such as the Ivy League, or public universities such as University of California–Berkeley or the University of Virginia, to name but a few. Yet others have open admission much like a community college. Table 6 provides a selectivity overview of liberal arts colleges.

**Table 6. 2012–2013 Liberal Arts College Acceptance and Yield Rate Overview**

Statistic	Acceptance Percentage (%); N=233	2012–2013 Admission Yield (%); N=233
Mean	57.9	30.2
Median	62.3	27
Standard Deviation	21	13.6
Range	6.7 to 98.3	9 to 87

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Yield rates on average are just under 31 percent, meaning more than two-thirds of students accepted do not attend. There is a wide variation in yield rates ranging from poor yields of 9, 10 and 11% at Hartwick College, Willamette University, and Wittenberg University respectively. At the other end of the spectrum, the best yield is 84, 86, and 87% at the United States Air Force Academy, the United States Military Academy, and

the United States Naval Academy respectively. The best private college yield is 81% at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. Not surprisingly, yield rates are higher at institutions offering lower tuition or bigger grant aid or those that attract a high percentage of early-decision applicants.

Whether an institution is extremely selective could affect the type of president selected. For instance, elite institutions such as Swarthmore, Williams, or Davidson have an academic standard as high as any university, and the type of faculty they recruit follows the standard they pursue. In a shared governance environment, where faculty play an important role in the selection of their president, it is possible that the academic standard placed upon the presidential candidate is also of the highest standing, potentially making it difficult for a nontraditional president to break through this barrier.

## **6. Financial revenue and pricing: highly differentiated contexts for presidents**

### *Endowment: Haves and Have-Nots*

Since the vast majority of liberal arts colleges lose money on an operating basis, having a significant endowment and the annual returns it generates is, for many, a requirement. The “core revenue” that colleges and universities report in their financial statements includes the returns that come from the endowment portfolio. Many institutions critically depend on these annual revenue windfalls from the endowment since they lose money on the rest of the enterprise. An overview of the endowment landscape is summarized in Table 7.

**Table 7. Liberal Arts College Endowment Overview**

Statistic (n=234)	2012–2013 Endowment per Student FTE (\$)	2012–2013 Total Endowment per Liberal Arts College (\$ Millions)
Mean	137,685	237
Median	60,982	100
Standard Deviation	238,747	369.6
Range	44 to 2,505,435	0.03 to 2,026
Total	NA	55,452

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

At a quick glance it might be easy to conclude that liberal arts colleges have substantial endowments that could weather any storm. The total endowment in 2013 was \$55.5 billion for the 234 institutions for which endowment information was available. In most other countries, given the predominant role governments play in funding higher education, such levels of private philanthropy are rarely seen. However, a careful examination of the numbers indicates that the endowment situation among liberal arts colleges is a story of the “haves” and “have-nots.”

The University of Richmond, at \$2.03 billion, holds the largest single endowment in 2013, more than the 86 least-endowed colleges combined. The average endowment among stand-alone liberal arts colleges is \$237 million, but the median is much lower at \$100 million. The distribution of wealth is not a normal distribution and is quite skewed with 70% of the endowment wealth held by 20% of the schools, a fact further underlined by the high standard deviation. Further, during the past several years the stock market and global recession have introduced tremendous volatility into the size of endowments.

A better basis for comparison of endowments is endowment per student. Here the contrast between the “haves” and “have-nots” could not be clearer in 2013, with the “poorest” being SUNY College–Old Westbury with \$44 endowment per student. The median of \$60,982 is situated between Bethany College at \$60,234 and Coe College at \$61,730 per student. At the upper end, Soka University and Pomona College have \$2,505,435 and \$1,146,818 respectively in endowment per student. As an example, assuming Pomona’s endowment returned 5% per year, that would be enough to offer more than \$50,000 in tuition scholarship to each student. Unfortunately for Pomona, their annual costs far exceed this amount, so they would be required to “dip into principal” from the endowment to pay for expenses were they to do this. To be fair, they do use their considerable endowment to offer average annual financial aid of about \$36,000 per student to the 57% of the student body that is not full pay in year one.

The mere fact of having a high endowment does not fully insulate most institutions from financial stress. Endowments are often restricted or earmarked for special purposes, reducing the ability to tap them for flexible, unrestricted purposes in the budget. Recent financial market volatility is another reason. In 2007 the average endowment per FTE was 11.5% higher than in 2012, meaning that most institutions’ endowments have shrunk despite continued fund-raising during that period. Buoyant stock markets improved this situation by 2013, but endowments were still on average lower than they were five years previously. Given many institutions’ reliance on endowment returns to balance their operating budget, a down year in their investment portfolio means they have to spend principal. This makes presidential oversight over annual budget cycles more complicated, from planning to delivery.

The financial context surrounding liberal arts college presidents is both situation-specific and dynamic. Whereas for many decades in the 20th century liberal arts colleges enjoyed a rather stable, consistent financial path, the changes in pricing, endowments, expenses, and applicant behavior today are very dynamic. College presidents face dramatically changing business models and are forced to make choices in pursuing conflicting objective functions that often place mission, ranking, and financial performance at odds with each other. Whether a college president comes from a traditional or nontraditional background, the fact is that he or she is the executive in charge of financial stewardship.

The implication of the financial situation and trends for most presidents and aspirants in the liberal arts is clear. In an environment where expenses and list-price tuition rates are rising faster than inflation, net revenues are flattening, costs are largely fixed with tenured faculty and bricks and mortar, structural changes are exceptionally difficult to make given the multiplicity of stakeholders and entrenched cultures and traditions, and endowments are modest, the only way out of the box for many liberal arts college presidents is to find new sources of revenue. This can come either from increased philanthropy, changes in the business model, and/or alternative revenue sources.

Some presidents face outright economic crises. Not surprisingly, many liberal arts presidents now need to spend a huge percentage of their time raising money and tending to financial matters, a task at odds with the traditional focus on teaching, pedagogy, and curriculum that presidents faced for centuries leading up to the 1990s. It could be argued that some liberal arts colleges are in a very strong financial position that is structurally different from the rest. The United States Naval, Military, and Air Force

Academies certainly fit this description. Additionally, possibly 25 to 30 of the most highly ranked, highly endowed institutions have such a strong position that they are in a category by themselves. Chapter 5 explores how this influences the choice of president.

*Economic Model: The Expense and Revenue Equation*

Although any higher education institution is loath to consider itself as a business, there is no question that each liberal arts institution is an economic enterprise that has revenues, costs, budgets, and economic constraints. As a nonprofit entity, the liberal arts college simply has a different objective function than a for-profit business. Instead of seeking to maximize profit for shareholders, it seeks to fulfill its mission within the economic parameters it must meet to remain viable. Liberal arts colleges do not seek to make a profit, and they excel at achieving this objective since the vast majority lose money on an operating basis (defined here as annual revenues from students minus the cost of running the enterprise, excluding the endowment). Operating losses are primarily covered by borrowing, annual gifts, or drawing down the endowment.

From an annual operating point of view, two metrics—total tuition and fees, and core expenses—provide insight into the size of the economic flows into and out of a liberal arts college, and thus provide a proxy as to the size of the enterprise from an economic point of view. Tuition and fees is a primary measure of the revenue that a liberal arts college receives net of institutional grant aid, rebates, and discounts. There is also room and board, endowment income, and some ancillaries, but the core business of a liberal arts college is delivering the education for which a student pays either directly or through loans.



However, for most institutions, tuition and fee revenue covers only a portion of total expenses. Perhaps a better proxy of the economic size of a liberal arts institution is its core expenses, which includes the amount of grant aid an institution offers students, but does not properly measure how much money flowed out of the institution annually in cash (i.e., the amount spent on salaries and operations in cash is lower since grant aid is not a cash expense external to the institution). For public institutions where tuition is subsidized, it provides a more accurate proxy for annual economic flows. Table 8 provides an overview of 2012–2013 tuition and fee revenue and core expenses.

**Table 8. 2012–2013 Overview of Total Tuition and Fees Revenue, and Total Core Expenses for Liberal Arts Colleges**

Statistic	Total Tuition and Fees; (\$); n=245	Total Core Expenses; (\$); n=245
Mean	29,395,004	57,880,695
Median	23,943,374	42,947,517
Standard Deviation	22,992,335	55,622,314
Range	0 to 129,896,280	2,417,480 to 496,240,833
Total	7,201,775,871	14,180,770,282

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

In 2012–2013 the average liberal arts college received total tuition and fees of about \$29 million, and the median college is Bennington College with tuition revenue of almost \$24 million. There is a wide variation in tuition revenue received, which is reflected in the standard deviation of almost \$23 million and the very broad range from 0 at the military academies to just under \$130 million at Middlebury College.

In 2012–2013 the average liberal arts college had core expenses of about \$58 million. The median enterprise is Albright College at just under \$43 million. Variations are quite high as reflected in the standard deviation of more than \$55.6 million. Although it has zero tuition revenue, the institution with the largest core expense is the United States Military Academy at \$496.2 million. The three smallest institutions in terms of core expenses are Sterling College, Shimer College, and Thomas More College of the Liberal Arts at \$2.4 million.

An entire series of books could be written just on the financial situation facing American higher education. According to Touryalai in *Forbes* (2014), student loan debt has soared past a trillion dollars and has the highest category of default rates of any debt. Combined with ever-increasing tuition levels stretching the ability of families and students to afford college, the financial model of higher education in the United States merits scrutiny. This financial model is derived from a combination of financial elements including endowment, list-price tuition, tuition discounting, grants and subsidies, net revenues, expenses, and size.

The stand-alone liberal arts college, driven by its often quintessentially residential experience, a low student-to-faculty ratio, and an amenities arms race to attract students is one of the most expensive forms of education there is. Yet, the financial model deployed by the 248 liberal arts colleges is far from uniform, and the financial situation facing a liberal arts college president is dramatically different from one institution to another, potentially creating a contextual element that could influence the type of president selected. College presidents, no matter what their background, are responsible for the financial viability, stewardship, and budget of their institution. With some notable

exceptions among the elite or state-supported colleges, one thing the vast majority of liberal arts college presidents do share is a very challenged financial model. As such, the several key levers underpinning the liberal arts financial model—list-price tuition, tuition discounting and full payers, financial aid, and tuition versus endowment dependence—are explored in some detail, as they reveal several contextual elements that presidents must face on a daily basis and that clarify some of the structural economic challenges facing liberal arts colleges.

*List-Price Tuition: Rising and as Varied as the Airline Industry*

Anyone who has children and has tried to figure out how much college will cost knows that tuition pricing across and within colleges is as bewildering and complicated as airline ticket pricing or as varied as mobile telephone plans. Just as the passenger sitting next to you on the plane likely paid a very different price for his or her seat, the same is true of two students standing next to one another at high school graduation heading to two different schools, or at the same college's fall orientation a few months later. And just as a full-priced airline seat or international phone call minute remains very expensive compared to various deals available, list-price tuition and fees in higher education can also be quite high. Liberal arts colleges are no exception. Moreover, food and lodging are additional. Table 9 provides an overview of list tuition prices.

**Table 9. Overview of 2012–2013 List-Price Tuition at Private and State Schools**

Statistic	2012–2013 List-Price Tuition and Fees at Private LA Colleges (\$/year); n=218	2012–2013 List-Price In-State Tuition and Fees at Public LA Colleges (\$/year); n=27	2012–2013 List-Price Out-of-State Tuition and Fees at Public LA Colleges (\$/year); n=27
Mean	32,636	6,741	15,426
Median	36,350	6,704	16,096
Standard Deviation	9,630	3,553	8,297
Range	6,800 to 46,924	0 to 14,773	0 to 33,811

Source: IPEDS; UNSWR Compass 2014 data

As of 2013 the three most expensive were Wesleyan University (CT), Vassar College, and Sarah Lawrence College with the latter's 2012–2013 list-price tuition and fees at \$46,924 (now more than \$50,000 for school year 2014–2015). Many other highly ranked liberal arts colleges are more than \$40,000, clearly illustrating the point that tuition can be high for full-paying students. The average private college tuition price of more than \$32,500 is not cheap either. However, at many schools, list prices are far lower. For instance in school year 2012–2013 Stillman College, at \$15,062, is less than half the average. These wide variations within private and public colleges are reflected in the high standard deviations of \$9,630 (private) and \$3,553 (in-state).

A further wrinkle is that public liberal arts colleges charge far less for tuition on average. In 2012–2013 annual in-state tuition at the average public liberal arts college was \$26,166 less than their private counterparts, and out-of-state tuition was still on average less than half as expensive. It is true that, at 27, the number of public liberal arts colleges is small, but they underline the more salient reality that most liberal arts colleges compete directly with liberal arts programs at larger universities that are subsidized by

the government and have directionally similar pricing to their purely stand-alone liberal arts public counterparts. For example, Washington & Lee or the University of Richmond have to compete with the University of Virginia for some top students (particularly from Virginia) considering the liberal arts, and the University of Virginia's 2014–2015 in-state tuition and fees—at more than \$13,000—is less than one-third the price. Some highly ranked and selective liberal arts colleges such as the United States Military Academy, United States Air Force Academy, and United States Naval Academy charge no tuition and fees whatsoever. Thus, list-price tuition pricing across liberal arts colleges is literally all over the map.

The pricing of a liberal arts education, and how to balance list price versus net price after tuition discounts, is a critical tradeoff facing every college president. Not only do they need to justify the return on investment to an increasingly demanding public, the revenue generated by pricing changes is important to the business model and financial strength of a college. Although there is variation in the amount, an analysis of IPEDS shows that all liberal arts colleges have, without exception, increased what they charge families and students for in-state and out-of state tuition between the school years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013. Despite challenged family budgets and flattening incomes created by the worst recession in the United States since the Great Depression, 236 liberal arts colleges for which data is available increased in absolute terms the mean list price in-state tuition and fees by an average of 28% during this time. Compared with historically low inflation rates that—according to [usinflation.org](http://usinflation.org)—totaled 10.4% in the United States during the period January 2008 to December 2013, these increases are substantial and 2.5 times the inflation rate.

The rationale for these tuition price increases is four-fold. First, many institutions have faced dramatic declines in their endowments and endowment income and needed to attempt to find new revenue. Second, for some institutions, particularly among the elite schools, price can be an indicator of perceived quality, just like many luxury goods. Third, some schools have been able to increase price because their full-paying students continue to be willing to foot the bill and/or because the price increases have been inelastic and led to net-revenue increases among non-full payers. Fourth, the elite schools set a price umbrella under which other liberal arts colleges may reference price themselves and thus may feel justified increasing price when the leaders are. However, for many institutions, these price increases may not lead to proportionally higher net revenues, as some students can't afford them, either seeking lower-priced alternatives or requiring greater discounts.

#### *Tuition Discounting, Full-Payers, and Financial Aid*

Just as with many purchases, it is human nature to seek a good deal. Everyone takes their measure of satisfaction getting a discount, and liberal arts colleges in this respect often fulfill this desire well. The price any student actually pays at a given institution varies dramatically, with discounts ranging from zero for full-paying students to a full-ride scholarship. The reality is that, on average, liberal arts colleges provide very high tuition discounts and few students pay full list price; however, as with many averages, this reality does not hold true at all institutions. College presidents have to solve the complex equation of list-price increases and discounts to try to increase net revenue. It is also plausible that schools with differing discount rates might have

different propensities to hire nontraditional presidents. Table 10 provides an overview of the liberal arts full-pay, tuition-discount, and grant-aid landscape.

**Table 10. 2012–2013 Full-Pay, Tuition Discount, Financial Aid Summary**

Statistic	2012–2013 Full Pay Students (%); n=241	2012–2013 Average Tuition Discount (%); n=239	Average amount of institutional grant aid received by full- time, first-time undergraduates (\$); n=239
Mean	19.4	45	18,018
Median	6	49	18,470
Standard Deviation	24.3	16.8	9,290
Range	0 to 100	0 to 98	833 to 40,826

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

The average liberal arts college has only 19% of students who pay list tuition price, but the median school has only 6% full-pays. In other words, at the 50th percentile, more than 94% of students get a discount. The average level of discounting is substantial at 45%, and the average amount of discount provided in the form of grant aid (i.e., not student loans) is \$18,018. Conversely, some liberal arts colleges such as Martin University or New College of Florida provide almost no discount. The high variations among institutions in number of full-pays, average tuition discount, and grant aid are reflected in the standard deviations and the wide ranges.

A comparison of two colleges serves as a case in point. According to IPEDS, Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, charged list-price tuition of \$44,118 in 2012–2013, up 21.3% from 2007–2008. The average tuition discount rate was 38.9% in 2012–2013. However, the number of students who paid the full tuition in 2012–2013 was 50%.

This means that 50% of the students received an average discount of 77.8% or \$34,290 per student in absolute reduction terms. Emory & Henry, by contrast, is in a very different situation. The number of students who paid the full tuition is zero. Its list-price tuition in 2012–2013 was \$28,122, up 26% from 2007–2008 but more than \$18,000 cheaper than Bowdoin. The average tuition discount rate at Emory & Henry is 64.5%, or \$18,127, in 2012–2013. Although Emory & Henry has a higher percentage discount, the absolute amount of the discount is less than at Bowdoin. Ironically, in 2012–2013 the average amount of discount of \$34,290 per student receiving a discount at Bowdoin is greater than the list price of \$28,122 at Emory & Henry.

In both extreme cases, discounting is used for different purposes. For the elite liberal arts colleges, discounting can be used to attract both high-ability students and/or highly desired diversity with or without financial need to make a more competitive class. For a much lower-ranked school, discounting may be used to reach a price point needed for a potentially lower-ability student or the price-sensitive student.

There is evidence that students and their parents actually prefer a discount compared to a lower list-price tuition. Recently, Converse College was considering making a significant list-price tuition reduction instead of increasing its discount. A survey in a recent article by Lewin in the *New York Times* (2013) recounting Converse College's quandary showed that students and parents actually chose the discount that was more expensive for them compared to a tuition list-price reduction when presented with the two alternatives. Pricing sophistication is often needed, as the perception of price is often not equal to the actual price that will be paid. In the article, where parents were asked their preference, "twice as many families preferred the high-cost, high-discount



approach [versus a tuition cut], and the consultants warned that cutting tuition would cut the freshman class in half” (para. 21).

Beyond fund-raising and limited alternative revenue streams from real estate or summer programs, most liberal arts colleges offer one product—a liberal arts education; that is their only source of revenue. Some have managed to also increase room and board fees and to create new top-line revenue, but for most schools net tuition is a critical metric. For low-endowment schools, of which there are many, getting the revenue equation right for the president is essential to “making the class” and balancing the budget. It is likely that tuition plans will continue to evolve with a panoply of offerings. It is equally clear that sooner, rather than later, not only will the ever-rising list-price tuition and discounting model reach its limit, but college presidents will have to take a fundamental look at the cost structure they will need to stay in the game; for many, this will be grim.

#### *Tuition and Endowment Dependence*

The financial viability and business model of a liberal arts college from a revenue point of view primarily hinges upon two sources of income: tuition and fees, and endowment income and other annual gifts. Other sources of revenue flows include research grants, direct government subsidies—as is the case for the military colleges or public liberal arts colleges—and ancillary revenues from summer programs. Colleges that have a business model where tuition and fees is the primary source of revenue used to cover its expenses are tuition dependent. Others that rely heavily on endowment or other forms of subsidy are not tuition dependent. Table 11 summarizes the degree

of tuition dependence across liberal arts colleges, as well as the trend during the past five years.

**Table 11. Tuition Dependence and Five-Year Trend among Liberal Arts Colleges**

Statistic	2007– 2008 Tuition and Fees Revenue as % of Core Expenses (n=240)	2012– 2013 Tuition and Fees Revenue as % of Core Expenses (n=245)	Absolute Five-year Percentage Point Change in Tuition and Fees Revenue as % of Core Expenses	2007– 2008 Tuition and Fees Revenue as % of Core Revenue (n=240)	2012– 2013 Tuition and Fees Revenue as % of Core Revenue (n=245)	Absolute Five-year Percentage Point Change in Tuition and Fees Revenue as % of Core Revenue
Mean	53.5	54.9	1.4	62.5	46.2	-16.3
Median	55.5	56.3	0.8	61.5	46	-15.5
Standard Deviation	21.1	19.9	-1.2	32.3	18.9	-13.4
Range	0 to 108	0 to 110	NA	0 to 430	0 to 99	NA

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

On average, liberal arts college presidents face an economic equation where tuition and fees covers only a fraction of core expenses. In 2008 and 2013, revenue from tuition and fees covered 53.5 to 54.9% of core expenses. However, there is huge variation—as shown in the standard deviation of 21% and the broad range—with some institutions having zero revenues from tuition and others being fully tuition dependent. Since core expenses include the amount of institutional aid grants provided by a college, the coverage of actual cash expenses (i.e., excluding tuition discounts by financial aid grants) by tuition is higher than 54.9%, but it is fair to say that the vast majority of liberal

arts colleges require substantial revenue from the endowment, gifts, or government grants (e.g., to public institutions such as the military academies) to remain viable.

The issue that has been faced by virtually all college presidents during the past seven years has been the financial crisis that shook college endowments and families' wealth to the core. In 2008 many endowments plunged, creating losses and, in effect, meaning for many colleges that core revenues either came from tuition, annual gifts, borrowing, or direct draw-downs from endowment principal. One peculiarity of college accounting is that colleges consider money that flows from the endowment or balance sheet borrowing into the operating budget as "core revenue" whether it comes from principal or investment income. As such, many liberal arts college presidents have had to address a huge economic squeeze as Boards of Trustees saw huge investment portfolio volatility and losses. In 2008 the average liberal arts college received 62.5% of its core revenues from tuition and fees, whereas by 2013 this had declined to 46.2%, indicating that the rising financial markets provided relief to colleges. Once again, it should be noted that the revenue situation of a given liberal arts college is highly segmented; some receive the vast majority of their revenue from endowments and others from tuition. Given that most liberal arts colleges' costs and expenses are fixed in the form of salaries and large physical plant, having a volatile revenue base is difficult to navigate. How the financial situation of a college affects the propensity to have a nontraditional president is explored in Chapter 6.

## **7. Ranking**

Love them or hate them, ranking of colleges and universities has become commonplace in the United States by several organizations ranging from *Forbes* to

USNWR to *Bloomberg*. They are relevant because they are viewed by many students as an authoritative source and, in turn, are then pursued to a certain extent by colleges to increase their rank. This research uses the USNWR ranking data, as it is perhaps the most widely read, and it provides separate ranking of liberal arts colleges.

Rank is an example of a hybrid metric since USNWR factors in several criteria to determine ranking. The ranking algorithm factors in variables such as selectivity, endowment, faculty resources, alumni giving, graduation rate performance, and reputation among peers and high school counselors. As such, the reality is that many of the highest-ranked schools are also among the most highly endowed, highly resourced, selective schools, and are generally not among the smaller half of liberal arts colleges. Among the most elite of these schools, say the top 15 or so percent, it is plausible that it may be more difficult for a nontraditional president to be selected. Reasons could be that these institutions have enough financial flexibility to continue longstanding tradition, or the challenge of gaining the acceptance of some of the faculty, most of whom have tenure. The validity of this hypothesis is examined in Chapter 6.

#### **8. Geography: liberal arts colleges are not uniformly distributed**

The location of a liberal arts college is a relevant variable for a liberal arts college president. Some are rural—such as Kenyon College—while others are more urban—such as Goucher College in Baltimore. Many states face declining enrollments—such as Maine or Pennsylvania—whereas others—such as Texas—have booming economies and growing enrollments. Some states' public universities are very strong and well funded, whereas others are struggling amid budget crises. These geographic aspects may

influence the competitive landscape and as well the pool of student candidates and the attractiveness to certain student groups.

USNWR breaks the United States universities down into four regions: North, South, Midwest, and West. Given that the liberal arts is perhaps the oldest form of higher education in the United States, it could follow that the proclivity of a region to have a liberal arts school could relate to the age of the region. For instance, Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, were founded in 1773 and 1782 respectively. However it is equally clear that population and other factors play a role. An analysis of the location of the 248 liberal arts colleges shows that they are not uniformly distributed across regions (Table 12).

**Table 12. Distribution of Liberal Arts Colleges by Region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Number of Colleges</b>	<b>Percentage of Colleges</b>
North	83	33.5
South	71	28.6
Midwest	58	23.4
West	36	14.5
	Total= 248	Total = 100%

Source: USNWR 2013; USNWR Compass 2014 data

The North, the oldest region of the United States, has more than double the number of liberal arts colleges than the West. Pennsylvania alone has more liberal arts colleges than California; and Pennsylvania and Massachusetts together have more than the entire West. Only 38 states have at least one stand-alone liberal arts college, and 12 (Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, Kansas, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming) do not have any, although clearly liberal arts courses and degrees are offered in every state. It is unclear why geography might influence the selection of a nontraditional president versus a traditional president.

## 9. Five-year trends: resilience but a strained financial model

### *Total Size of Liberal Arts Colleges*

Recognizing that each college has its highly segmented and unique situation, it is nevertheless worthwhile to examine how the stand-alone liberal arts colleges have fared collectively throughout the recent five-year economic trials and tribulations brought on by the recession. Examination of aggregate size characteristics of liberal arts colleges is shown in Table 13. The trends for the average liberal arts college are shown in Table 14 and indicate that colleges overall have shown resilience and weathered the storm better than many might believe.

**Table 13. Five-Year Trends 2007–2008 to 2012–2013 on Total Size of Liberal Arts Colleges**

Size Dimension	2007–2008	2012–2013	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total # applicants/year (n=232)	645,162	788,347	143,185	22.2
Total #applicants enrolling/year (n=232)	98,519	97,886	-633	-0.64
Total # student FTE enrolled (n=244)	415,453	432,256	16,803	4
Total revenue from tuition and fees (\$ B); n=240	6.078	7.202	1.124	18.5
Total core expenses (\$ B); n=244	12.68	14.148	1.50	11.84
Total FTE Staff Employed (n=243)	99,967	105,616	5,649	5.7
Total Endowment (\$ B); n=233	50.437	54.107	5.015	9.9

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

From a demand point of view, collectively liberal arts colleges essentially treaded water from 2008 to 2013, in itself an accomplishment considering the tough macroeconomic environment. Applications rose 22.2 percent, improving selectivity numbers at many institutions, and the total number of students enrolled at liberal arts colleges rose 4%. However, the overall number of applicants who actually enrolled per year fell by 633 students or 0.6%, indicating that there is real pressure on growth. Part of this discrepancy between the increase in number of applicants and decrease in new enrollments can be explained not only by an increase in the number of applications per student, fueled by the common application and easier or cheaper application requirements, but also increased competition from non-stand-alone liberal arts colleges that put pressure on yield.

Partially as a reaction to losses in the endowment, liberal arts colleges collectively were successful in growing their total revenue from tuition and fees during the crisis by more than \$1 billion, or 18.5%, from 2007–2008 to 2012–2013. For the average liberal arts institution, this translated into an increase in list-price tuition and fees by almost 28%. This was partially offset by increasing the tuition discount rate through increased scholarships by 5 percentage points. This nets out to a five-year increase of \$1,748 in tuition and fees actually paid by each student and their families each year via loans, non-college scholarships, or savings. Increasing price and revenue well above the rate of inflation during a historic recession is a tribute to the value of a liberal arts education and institutions' overall ability to capture that value from students and their families. However, the ability to continue to do this appears to be fading as many institutions are finding it difficult or impossible to increase both price and tuition revenue.

If liberal arts college presidents were able to hold expenses constant while increasing revenues by more than \$1 billion, they would be in a much better financial position. In effect, since revenue increases by hiking price essentially result in pure profit *ceteris paribus*, this more than \$1 billion in tuition revenue increase is worth as much as raising \$20 billion in endowment that pays out 5% per year. Unfortunately for them, this is not the case, as core expenses increased by \$1.5 billion during the five-year period, 39% more than tuition revenue. Although some of the core-expense increase is explainable by the increase in tuition discounting that accrues to core expenses, the reality is that overall liberal arts colleges increased employment during the five-year period by 5,649 staff, or 5.7%, and most had to face automatic wage and benefit increases brought on by inflation. Presidents overall have thus found it very difficult to reduce or hold core expenses constant, even in a crisis. This is not surprising in a context defined by shared governance, high fixed costs driven by residential bricks and mortar, and many staff with job protection such as tenure. Expenses rising more than revenue is a worrying trend that will pressure many liberal arts college presidents, particularly at institutions that are no longer able to increase tuition revenue and have small endowments.

Although a slim minority of institutions is able to sustain themselves on tuition, for most, a critical component of the liberal arts college economic model is the endowment. One of the areas that has underpinned the resilience of many liberal arts colleges has been the generous philanthropy of alumni and stakeholders who believe strongly in the value of the liberal arts education. During the five-year period 2008 to 2013, endowments improved by just over \$5 billion, reflecting new fund-raising and improved financial market conditions.



*Average Liberal Arts College: Five-Year Trends*

The aggregate statistics do not tell the story for the average institution. During the five-year period ending in school year 2012–2013, the average liberal arts college was successful in raising more tuition revenue by increasing list tuition prices more than their discounts (i.e., increasing net tuition) and in growing core expenses more slowly than net revenue—a positive trend. Endowment per FTE was slightly up. Table 14 summarizes key five-year financial trends for the average liberal arts institution.

**Table 14. Five-Year Trends for the Average Liberal Arts Institution**

Financial Variable	Mean 2007–2008	Mean 2012–2013	Absolute 5–Year Change	% 5–Year Change in Mean
Out-of-state Tuition (\$); n=239	24,090	30,802	6,712	27.9
Revenue from Tuition and Fees per FTE (\$); n=243	14,629	16,323	1,694	11.6
Tuition Discounting (%)	40.2	45	4.8	11.9
Total Revenue from Tuition and Fees (\$); n=240	25,323,077	29,395,004	4,071,927	16.1
Total Core Expenses (\$); n=	51,968,829	57,880,695	5,911,866	11.4
Endowment Assets Year-End per FTE Enrollment (\$); n=229	133,736	137,685	3,949	2.9

Source: IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

### *Financial Case Studies*

It is clear that the general trends and overall statistics, while useful, do not tell the full story. The specific pressures and context facing a liberal arts college president varies dramatically from one institution to another. To better frame the financial context at the individual institution level, and to show the level of change taking place for a college president, I offer three short case studies from Vassar College, Whittier College, and Wheaton College (MA).

#### *Case Study #1: Vassar College*

By virtue of its 94% graduation rate, Vassar College of Poughkeepsie, New York, is a “medallion” college. For a long time, Vassar has been considered one of the top liberal arts colleges from its days as one of the “Seven Sisters” of all-women’s colleges to its now coeducational focus. Its president, Catharine Bond-Hill, formerly the provost of Williams College, is a traditional president, appointed in 2006. According to IPEDS, in 2013 Vassar had an endowment of \$861 million, enrolled 2,469 students, and accepted 22.8% of applicants. Its rank in USNWR in 2014 among liberal arts colleges was 13. An examination of key financial parameters (Table 15) at Vassar during the five-year period 2008 to 2013 shows just how difficult it is to stay at the top, the substantial changes and strain being put on the financial model, and the president who is responsible for the financial stewardship of the institution.

**Table 15. Overview of Five-Year Financial Parameters at Vassar College**

Institutional Financial Dimension	2007–2008	2012–2013	Absolute 5-Year Change	5-Year Percentage Change
Out-of-State Tuition and Fees (\$)	38,115	46,270	8,155	21.4
Revenue from Tuition and Fees per FTE Enrolled (\$)	26,866	24,134	-2,732	-10.2
Total Revenues from Tuition and Fees (\$)	66,028,651	59,083,322	6,945,329	-10.5
Endowment Assets at Year-End per FTE Enrollment	344,489	351,860	7,371	2.1
Core Expenses	136,490,699	147,002,997	10,512,298	7.7
# FTE Staff (Full-Time Instructors)	1,057 (293)	986 (279)	-71 (-14)	-6.7 (-4.8)
% of Full-Time, First-Time Undergraduates Receiving Institutional Grant Aid	55	60	5	9.1
Avg. Amount of Institutional Grant Aid Received by Full-Time, First-Time Undergrads (\$)	27,635	38,739	11,104	40.2

Source: IPEDS

During the five-year period, Vassar increased its list-price tuition more than 21%, or \$8,155. However, despite this price increase, annual tuition and fee revenue per student and revenue from tuition and fees overall fell during the five years by more than 10%, or absolute decreases of \$2,732 and \$6.9 million. Given that inflation during this

same period was about 10%, this represents a reduction in real terms of about 20% in revenue—a dramatic reduction that translates directly to the bottom line. Part of the explanation for this is that 5% of Vassar’s students moved from paying full tuition and fees to receiving large financial aid packages. During the five-year period, Vassar increased the average amount of grant aid per student by more than 40%, from \$27,635 to \$38,739, while increasing the mix of those receiving aid from 55 to 60%. In other words, 60% of Vassar’s students received, on average, a tuition and fees scholarship (i.e., tuition discount) offer of 83.7% to attend Vassar in 2013.

Perhaps in recognition that tuition revenue may be at a “new normal,” Vassar clearly made an adjustment to its economic model during this time frame and reduced the number of staff by 6.7%. Fortunately for Vassar, it has a very large endowment and was able to increase its endowment per student by 2% despite the crisis. Nevertheless, a few things can be observed. Tuition increases do not automatically translate into revenue increases and can actually result in negative price elasticity as in Vassar’s case (i.e., the percentage drop in revenue is greater than the percentage increase in price). Further, economics are very sensitive to shifts in the number of full-paying students. Each five-percentage-point shift from a full-paying student to a typical financial aid recipient costs Vassar \$4.8 million, essentially in profit.

Given that this analysis is outside-in, one can only speculate as to whether these changes were explicitly desired or not. A charitable interpretation would be that Vassar decided to provide more scholarship grants given the crisis and voluntarily reduced its revenue from tuition and fees, perhaps explicitly turning down very qualified students who could pay full price that they might have accepted in 2008. A different

interpretation would be that the market for top students is becoming more competitive, and the macroeconomic climate more challenging, and Vassar has had to spend more money to attract the quality of class that it seeks. In any case, it is clear that the changes to the financial model facing the president are very substantial. Nevertheless, Vassar's substantial endowment provides a strong cushion that can weather many storms. For all of what must have been herculean efforts at Vassar to adapt to a changing context (and this research does not even consider other changes to the curriculum, campus, and student experience) and the college's generosity in offering a great education with substantial financial aid to three-fifths of its students, its ranking slipped from 11 to 13 during the five years (it has since recovered to 11).

#### *Case Study #2: Wheaton College*

By virtue of its graduation rate of 76%, Wheaton College of Norton, Massachusetts, is a "brand-name" college. Founded in 1834 in the suburbs of Boston, Wheaton (2015) has a long tradition of excellence and a mission to be "a transformative liberal arts education for intellectually curious students in a collaborative, academically vibrant residential community that values a diverse world" (para. 3). During the five-year time frame 2007–2008 to 2012–2013, Ron Crutcher led Wheaton College. He retired in June 2014 and was replaced by the dean of Babson College's MBA program, Dennis Hanno. According to IPEDS, Wheaton's endowment in 2013 was \$176 million; it accepted 60.5% of students; and its 2013 ranking in USNWR was 65. An examination of key financial parameters (Table 16) at Wheaton during the five-year period 2008 to 2013 shows how some liberal arts institutions are falling behind, as well as the substantial changes and strain being faced by the new president.

**Table 16. Overview of Five-Year Financial Parameters at Wheaton College**

Institutional Financial Dimension	2007–2008	2012-2013	Absolute 5-Year Change	5-Year Percentage Change
Out-of-State Tuition + Fees (\$)	36,690	43,774	7,084	19.3
#FTE Students Enrolled	1663	1763	100	6
Acceptance Rate (%)	40.5	60.2	19.7	48.6
% of Full-Time First-Time Undergraduates Receiving Institutional Grant Aid Year-End per FTE Enrollment	68	91	23	33.8
Avg. Amount of Institutional Grant Aid Received by Full-Time First-Time Undergrads (\$)	18,466	23,259	4,793	26
Total Revenue from Tuition and Fees (\$)	40,838,696	38,743,342	-2,095,354	-5.1
Core Expenses	57,958,109	59,712,000	1,753,891	3
# Staff FTE	527	478	-49	9.3
Endowment Assets Year-End per FTE Enrollment (\$)	112,012	107,486	-4,526	-4

Source: IPEDS

During the five-year period, Wheaton increased its annual list-price tuition and fees by 19.3%, or \$7,083, presumably following price increases made by higher-ranked schools. During the same period, Wheaton also increased its enrollment by 6%, or 100 students. However, despite increasing both its list price and its number of students,

during the five-year period Wheaton College saw its revenue from tuition and fees decline by 5.1%, or \$2.1 million. Simply put, Wheaton saw the number of full-paying students decline from 32% to 9% in the five years. Put another way, Wheaton dramatically increased its financial aid packages, moving from offering an average tuition discount through grant aid of \$18,466 to 68% of students to \$23,259 to 92% of students. Even though Wheaton increased its generosity dramatically and actually reduced the average amount of tuition and fees received per student substantially, it had to decrease its selectivity by jumping its acceptance rate from 40.5 to 60.2%.

At the same time Wheaton's endowment assets per student declined by 4%. In reaction to this change in financial in-flows, Wheaton did not stand still and took what must have been difficult measures to cut costs by reducing the number of staff by 9.3%. A few things can be observed. Like Vassar, increasing list-price tuition prices does not always translate into revenue increases, and at Wheaton this move resulted in a revenue reduction. Similarly, economics are very sensitive to shifts in the number of full-paying students. Despite bigger financial aid packages offered to more students, Wheaton is struggling harder to attract its class, increasing its acceptance rate by almost 50%. Finally, although far from being in danger, Wheaton's financial model and position is trending in an unfavorable direction and must be a preoccupation of its new president. Should the trends repeat themselves in the next five years, Wheaton could find itself in dire straits.

It is impossible to know the intent or explicit strategy of Wheaton and its president from the numbers alone; interviews would be needed. A charitable interpretation of its trajectory during the five-year time frame is that in response to the

crisis and the financial plight of many families and students, Wheaton decided to play its part in providing financial good-will to society by dramatically increasing its financial aid in both amount and number of students. Its increase in acceptance rate and class size was an explicit strategy to offer a greater number of opportunities to qualified students in a difficult economic crisis. An alternative hypothesis is that Wheaton increased list-price tuition fees in an attempt to increase revenues during the crisis, given pressure on the endowment, but that it simply did not work. Wheaton's value proposition and admission strategy was unclear to the market, so Wheaton then had to cut price via tuition discounts and loosen selectivity to attract the number of students needed to make its class.

Although Wheaton's endowment in 2013 is a respectable \$176 million, Vassar's endowment is more than five times larger. As such, Wheaton is far more tuition- dependent in its financial model. Given the staff reductions that have just taken place, further expense reductions may be difficult, meaning the financial challenge for Wheaton's new president is likely to involve substantial fund-raising and improvement of the admission marketing model, among other changes to curriculum, programs, and facilities.

### *Case Study #3: Whittier College*

Whittier College is known, among other things, for being Richard Nixon's alma mater. With a graduation rate of 67%, Whittier College—located in southern California—qualifies as a “good buy” college. Compared to Wheaton College and Vassar College, Whittier had a more modest endowment of \$88.3 million dollars at year-end 2013. As such, it is a tuition-dependent school where 2012–2013 tuition and fees were 96% of core expenses according to IPEDS. Dr. Sharon Herzberger, a traditional



president who came to Whittier in 2005 after 25 years at Trinity College in Connecticut, leads Whittier College. Whittier is an example of a liberal arts college that has managed to move forward, grow, and improve its financial model significantly during the five-year time frame 2007–2008 to 2012–2013. Table 17 provides highlights of the evolution of key financial parameters at Whittier College over five years.

**Table 17. Overview of Five-Year Financial Parameters at Whittier College**

Institutional Financial Dimension	2007–2008	2012–2013	Absolute 5-Year Change	5-Year Percentage Change
Out-of-State Tuition+Fees (\$)	30,160	38,640	8,480	28.1
Average Tuition Discount Rate %	27.8	47	19.2	69.1
#FTE Students	1186	1695	509	43
Revenue and Fees per Student FTE	21,469	25,047	3,578	16.7
Total Revenue from Tuition and Fees (\$)	38,819,824	57,828,918	19,009,094	49
Core Expenses \$	49,522,173	60,438,599	10,916,426	22
# FTE Staff	373	456	83	23.3
Endowment Assets End of Year per FTE enrolled (\$)	42,578	38,487	-4,091	-9.6

Source: IPEDS

Like Vassar and Wheaton, during the five-year time frame, Whittier increased annual list-price tuition and fees substantially—by 28.1%, or \$8,480. Although Whittier’s discount rate increased from 27.8 to 47%, the net tuition and fees per student increased 16.7%, or \$3,578 per student. Further, the number of FTE students enrolled jumped 43%, or 509 students. As a result, and quite unlike Vassar and Wheaton, Whittier’s revenue from tuition and fees increased an impressive 49%, or \$19 million.

Whittier was able to do this by increasing applications by 70% and only slightly increasing its acceptance rate from 61.1 to 63.6%.

At the same time, Whittier increased its endowment from \$77.1 to \$88.8 million, although its endowment per student enrolled dropped almost 10%. Whittier's core expenses and staff employed both increased by more than 20% during the five-year period. However, Whittier increased expenses and staff at a much lower rate than it increased tuition revenue in both absolute and percentage terms, meaning that it substantially increased its operating margin.

Given that the analysis is conducted outside in using public data and is focused on examining financial parameters, further research would be required to understand what Whittier's explicit strategy was and why it has worked. One explanation could be that Whittier decided that it needed to pursue a growth strategy. It might then have invested to put in place a different and successful marketing and admission campaign designed to increase applications from existing and new target applicant pools, perhaps with changes to admission personnel and/or budgets. Another explanation could be that Whittier changed its value proposition and programs in a way that made it more attractive relative to its competition, such as public universities in California that had to hike in-state tuition during the crisis. An unlikely explanation is that Whittier simply got lucky and benefited from demographic shifts or an increasing desire to study the liberal arts in California. What is clear is that Whittier College has proven that it is possible to grow revenues, increase margins, increase applicants, and hold the line on selectivity at a liberal arts college during a sharp economic crisis.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Presidents' Perception of the Liberal Arts' Current and Future Context**

It is one thing to quantify and characterize liberal arts colleges on several dimensions as in Chapter 2; it is quite another to experience what happens day to day and year to year leading a college as president. The president is responsible for making the college run, setting strategy looking forward, reconciling stakeholder interests and, put crassly, selling the liberal arts product to students and philanthropists. Although a definitive, fact-based assessment of the complete liberal arts context and likely future scenarios is beyond the scope of this research, how college presidents see the current and future context is an instructive window into the reality they experience as president.

#### **1. Perceptions of current context**

Interviews identified six major factors affecting the liberal arts context today: (1) still-relevant curriculum; (2) tough competition; (3) segmented and subscale structure; (4) outcomes driving mission drift; (5) a challenged financial model; and (6) evolving faculty composition.

#### *The Liberal Arts Approach Is Still Relevant*

For centuries, studying the liberal arts has changed the lives of countless students. Whether it is discovering a passion for learning or a new subject, learning how to learn, mastering critical-thinking techniques, maturing socially and intellectually through an intense but intimate residential experience, or being apprenticed by great faculty that care and know the students' names, the liberal arts has created many ardent believers—including the four presidents interviewed. As John Fry, former president of liberal arts college Franklin and Marshall (and current president of Drexel University) put it,

“The gift that is given in these places is amazing.” It is fair to say that the interviews underlined a continued belief in a liberal arts curriculum’s relevance and capacity to change students’ lives in today’s complex world. What was unclear is the extent to which this will be delivered by stand-alone liberal arts institutions in the future.

### *Competition Is Tough and from All Sides*

Echoing themes uncovered in the literature review, while all the presidents agreed that the liberal arts are relevant, there was equal agreement that stand-alone liberal arts colleges face dramatically increased competition. As David Greene, president of Colby College, characterized it, “The competition comes from all sides; above and below and side-to-side.” Part of the competitive intensity may relate to the challenging or outright shrinking demographics in certain states in the Northeast that require colleges to work harder to find full-paying students and make their class. Some of the challenging demographics are in part mitigated by an influx of international students, but the cost of cultivating these students is higher. One reason why competition is tough is that there are roughly 250 stand-alone liberal arts colleges versus more than 4,000 higher education institutions in the United States alone. There are just a lot of choices facing students, and many are less expensive options. Combined with an increasing number of technology-based diplomas offered across geographies, liberal arts colleges have their work cut out.

In fact, for many liberal arts colleges, the largest competitors are public universities or—at the high end—other elite, private universities such as the Ivy League or the big research universities such as the University of Virginia, the University of Michigan, or the University of California–Berkeley. As Lawrence Schall described Oglethorpe University’s situation, “Our competitors are the big, public universities . . .

[like] University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, Georgia Southern, University of Florida, the University of Tennessee. Families are making the choice between an inexpensive, in-state, big, public institution that's probably created some kind of Honors College to make it look like a liberal arts college, but it's also got all the football, basketball, big life around it."

However, the economic crisis has led many state-owned public universities to face their own budget difficulties, and many have substantially raised both in-state and out-of-state tuition, decreasing their attractiveness relative to a liberal arts college. As William Bowen portrayed the dynamics, "The big changes, and . . . they will percolate down into the liberal arts colleges, are going to occur in the mid-level public universities . . . these places have pushed up tuition significantly." Whether the price gap between liberal arts colleges and public universities is increasing or decreasing after consideration of merit scholarships and tuition discounts is unclear from this research.

#### *Colleges Are Segmented, Stratified*

As the quantitative analysis of the characteristics of liberal arts colleges clearly pointed out, there are salient differences across liberal arts colleges on variables such as endowment, size, selectivity, religious affiliation, geography, price, graduation outcomes, or ranking, to name but a few. These differences mean that liberal arts colleges can be segmented along several different dimensions, depending on the segmentation's purpose. The presidents interviewed also observed these differences. President Schall commented, "Higher education is a very segmented system." As William Bowen put it, "There is one thing to be very clear about: there is no one situation. There are many, many situations. Each institution faces different circumstances."

The quantitative analysis clearly demonstrated that there are substantial differences in resources and wealth among the various liberal arts colleges. Although there was no clear agreement on where to draw the line, the college presidents interviewed saw this demarcation between the haves and have-nots; William Bowen referred to it as “stratification,” commenting on the differences in financial resources between the Williamses and Swarthmores of the world—colleges that can live primarily from their endowment—and more impoverished, tuition-dependent peers. He commented that the increasing levels of “divergence” in spending could primarily be attributed to increased returns from endowments and fund-raising and not from tuition. Whether it is the top 25 ranked institutions or the top 50, the general sense from the interviews was that the top 10 to 20% of liberal arts institutions are in a very different (and better) place than the remaining colleges.

*Liberal Arts Colleges Face Mission Drift and Increased Focus on Outcomes*

Many liberal arts institutions have been forced over time to adapt their curriculum offerings away from pure liberal arts majors to address evolving student needs. Interviews with college presidents revealed that the pressure to justify outcomes is rising. Families and students increasingly seek the justification why they should pay far more for the privilege of a liberal arts education than in the past; they want to understand the “return on investment.” This, in turn, has caused what David Greene views as “a lot of mission drift.” As Lawrence Schall observed after 10 years as a liberal arts college president, “A lot of these liberal arts colleges have gone just purely pre-professional. They really abandoned the liberal arts and started to do occupational therapy and nursing because that is what the market is demanding.”

The interviews clarified that mission drift was far from uniform, but that where it is happening, it is really a subtext about finding a value proposition that works for today's students. President Schall explained his view of the dynamics between the elites and non-elites as: "Swarthmore can hold a symposium on the value of the liberal arts. And tell all sorts of people to come talk and pretty much do pure liberal arts in the same way they always have because everyone there is going off to graduate school afterwards. . . . But for most of us, you've got to create the story around the pathway from liberal arts to life's success. . . . Saying get a good education and you'll be fine . . . ultimately . . . doesn't sell." John Fry disagreed with "this idea that faculty have that 'life after college, that's not on us'" attitude, instead arguing that the answer lies not in pure vocational models but more co-op-like programs.

#### *A Challenged Financial Model Predominates*

The quantitative analysis of Chapter 2 clearly highlighted the financial situation many liberal arts institutions face: expenses rising above the rate of inflation; tuition prices rising well above the rate of inflation; tuition discounting at some colleges well over 50%; endowment dependency and volatility challenges at the wealthy schools; and tuition dependency at others. All presidents interviewed acknowledged in various terms the challenged financial model facing colleges. Lawrence Schall succinctly summarized that the financial model facing liberal arts college presidents simply "doesn't work. It's brutal . . . there are a lot of schools that run with a 50 percent discount rate . . . we're in the merit scholarship game hugely as is everyone else." William Bowen added that the tuition-discounting model "has its limits" and is also a problem because "the fraction of

institutional aid that goes to merit aid rather than need-based aid is very high and very worrying . . . a huge mistake nationally.”

At the same time, the college presidents interviewed described the situation as varying strongly between the elite colleges and others. John Fry emphasized that among liberal arts colleges, “The only business model that works is the Williams model, which is you have a gigantic endowment. The only problem with that is if you have a 2008, then [the college] loses 40 percent or a material amount of operating income if the endowment doesn’t perform.”

#### *Shift in Faculty Models to Non-Tenured*

The quantitative analysis did not focus on trends in faculty, although the number of instructional staff remained relatively stable in the five years examined. One aspect of the current context that the interviews revealed is that the composition of faculty is evolving from a highly tenured group to a more diversified cadre. The number of tenured faculty and the trend line for the liberal arts is beyond the scope of this research.

However, William Bowen reported that recent research had revealed, “Between two-thirds and three-quarters of faculty today are non-tenured faculty, whereas twenty-five years ago it was the reverse.” This factor could be an explanation underpinning the increase in nontraditional presidents.

## **2. Future views: presidential perceptions of the future context for stand-alone liberal arts colleges**

Liberal arts colleges have been around in many cases for centuries, which means that they have a knack for survival and adaption. None of the presidents interviewed pretended to have a crystal ball, but they were willing to share their perceptions of



how the liberal arts context might evolve in the coming years. Far from an attempt to comment on every aspect of how the liberal arts landscape will evolve in the coming years, the commentary of the four presidents elicited several themes they perceive as likely.

*Theme 1: The Elite Will Be Fine; The Rest Will Struggle*

Continuing the theme of segmentation, there was broad agreement that the elite institutions with resources would continue to flourish, although whether that meant the top 25 or top 50 was unclear. “The elite sector of the liberal arts college world, places that have some resources and have strong enrollment demand, will be fine,” reflected William Bowen. Although he felt very good about Colby’s future, David Greene discussed the future state of the elite liberal arts colleges by warning, “The health of them is not guaranteed going forward. The liberal arts . . . are under assault in various ways and if they’re not under assault they’re at least being questioned in many different circles.”

However, there was equally concern. John Fry fretted, “I’m very worried. These places are dear places, but I think in many cases they’ve become too precious, too insulated, and too self-satisfied. And I worry because this is such an amazing form of education.” President Schall voiced his worry, indicating: “You have three or four schools shutting down a year now, . . . a whole number are abandoning the liberal arts, . . . a bunch are merging, [others] are going to online for adults.” He added that among more rural non-Tier 1 liberal arts colleges “there will be a lot of losers in that game.”

David Greene’s perception was that “the places that survive through the shake-out, some

of them will absolutely thrive. Others will look very, very different and maybe not in a way that people there would like them to be.”

*Theme 2: Partnerships and Alternative Revenue Streams Will Help*

Far from being fatalistic when thinking about the future, the presidents indicated that they expect to see more innovation and attention to partnerships and new revenue streams. One of a liberal arts college’s greatest strengths is that it is small and provides an intimate environment. But its strength is also its weakness, as small size means that, for many activities, these colleges lack the scale of larger universities. One of the possible solutions to that, some felt, was via increased partnerships. William Bowen surmises that one of the solutions is “to get scale through collaborations” such as those seen at the Claremont Colleges or the Associated Colleges of the South. In particular, he believes that there should be “more collaboration between the liberal arts colleges and the research universities.” He added that the liberal arts has a tradition of great teaching, while research institutions offer better advanced coursework and technology, and thus that their skillsets are complementary.

For a liberal arts college with a modest endowment that is already dependent on tuition, partial salvation may come in the form of alternative revenue streams. Tapping alternative sources of revenue is not a new idea, and some colleges have already pursued it with success. As one example, at Oglethorpe University, President Schall explained, “We have moved into the study abroad business. Oglethorpe faculty, Oglethorpe courses, Oglethorpe credit but with a partner doing on-the-ground logistics.” He added that Oglethorpe has opened up an English-language institute for 260 international students on campus and leveraged some of its Atlanta real estate into a \$60 million

property development project. According to him, these alternative revenue streams are one of the reasons why some boards are increasingly open to new profiles.

### *Theme 3: Cost to Degree Needs to Decrease*

Although there was strong belief in the residential model, a theme that emerged was the necessity to improve the value of a liberal arts education by decreasing the cost to degree. Reducing the time to obtain a degree is not a new idea. Robert Zemsky (2013), who helped pioneer a two-year doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania, put forth the idea of a three-year undergraduate diploma. Commenting on the residential model, William Bowen asserted that, looking forward, “it may be that a couple of years of the residential experiences are going to be, for many people, sufficient.” David Greene believed that, “there will be a number of places that will be forced to drive their prices down.”

Another way to decrease cost to degree is to reduce the time it takes to get a degree. John Fry emphatically asserted that the solution is to “give someone the opportunity to graduate in three years” and that many students “don’t want stupid summer jobs” and “want to be with their friends in the [college] community” because this is their community now. He further added that it’s “insane” for liberal arts colleges to “be following an agrarian schedule in America in 2014.”

### *Theme 4: There Could Be a Tipping Point*

The evolution of liberal arts colleges has always been somewhat gradual, like a river or stream carving its path slowly over time. One point of view was that there may be a catalyst or tipping point that might galvanize dramatic change. For instance, at some institutions it could be the loss of half of their full-paying or best-paying students or the need to increase financial aid or a significant decline in enrollment of 10 to 20%. John

Fry surmised, “In broad terms, there will just be a market reaction. There will be a point when people say, ‘Enough is enough. Penn State is good enough and we’re moving to other models because in the end the most important thing is to get that degree.’” The scale and scope of such a potential market reaction is impossible to gauge, but given the fixed-cost structure of these institutions, significant changes in enrollment patterns can have substantial economic repercussions, as seen in the case studies of Wheaton and Vassar.

*Theme 5: Technology and Internationalization Becoming More Relevant*

A couple of the presidents mentioned that they expect both technology and internationalization to become a more prevalent part of the liberal arts equation in years to come. William Bowen articulated that the rising middle class in emerging markets would lead to sizeable potential applicant pools among families who may not require financial aid, and that this is already happening in 10% or more of enrollments at certain institutions. David Greene felt that technology would help to create productivity, quipping, “If you can’t charge a \$50,000 per year price tag, then you’re going to have to have larger classes, you’re going to have to use technology to deliver education . . . [to] drive costs down.”

Another perspective was that technology, and in particular big data, may have a fundamental impact on the way that outcomes are assessed in the liberal arts context. David Greene pointed out that longitudinal data on LinkedIn or Facebook over time might substantially increase understanding of the “value the colleges and universities provide . . . [being] game-shifting in the way that places are understood.” It is unclear whether this will be good or bad news for a given liberal arts college.

If these four presidents' reflections and experiences are even close to indicative of the sentiment of the body politic of liberal arts presidents, it is clear that the coming decade or two will provide a highly dynamic and challenging environment for nontraditional and traditional presidents alike. The presidents underlined the financial challenges quantified and explained in Chapter 2, from tuition dependency to discounting to the widely varying endowments. Very few institutions will be able to rest on their laurels; economic and competitive pressures to improve affordability and outcomes will be relentless; and innovation on many fronts—curriculum, alternative- revenue sources, time to degree, and partnerships—will be at a premium. The further wildcard of technology and big data will also usher in a new wave of discontinuities and opportunities. Finding the right president will not become any easier, and what is already a difficult job may very well become even more difficult.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Definition, Number, and Pathway Characteristics of Nontraditional Presidents**

Chapters 2 and 3 portrayed the liberal arts landscape by quantifying the context of the colleges along several key segmentation dimensions, then exploring how college presidents view and experience the context. This chapter first explores the definition of a nontraditional president as seen by search executives and some of the college presidents before examining the number and characteristics of nontraditional liberal arts presidents overall, using the ACE, Birnbaum, and Beardsley definitions. By examining the population of liberal arts college presidents overall, comparisons can be made to the population of presidents at large of the ACE and Birnbaum studies. Chapter 5 integrates the quantified context of chapter 2 with the nontraditional president data of this chapter by analyzing what segments of liberal arts colleges hire nontraditional presidents.

#### **1. Search firm executives' definitions of nontraditional presidents**

All the debate and discussion about traditional and nontraditional candidates would lead one to believe that there is a common understanding about their definition and that search committees and executive search firms consistently apply this definition in the various presidential searches conducted. It would follow that candidates and presidents themselves have a clear understanding of what a nontraditional candidate is. Ironically, there is little agreement as to where to draw the line between a traditional and a nontraditional president. A comparison of existing research definitions, with definitions used by executive search firm executives (and a couple of college presidents), illustrates the many shades of gray and confusion associated with defining a nontraditional president.

As a reminder, Cohen and March defined a traditional president as someone who had come up through the tenured faculty ranks to become a provost and then college president. They further concluded that virtually all presidents came up through this path and that the rare individual who did not—such as General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who led Columbia University after WWII—was a nontraditional president. Although longitudinal data does not exist for the liberal arts college presidents’ pathways dating back to the 1980s, this definition of a traditional president has been the de facto default definition for decades. Jackie Zavitch of Korn Ferry agrees with this definition today, asserting that “a traditional candidate is really narrow. Someone who has come up through the ranks of faculty, has established his or her research agenda and publication record and has credibility with peers in his or her own discipline. Anyone who falls outside that category, including folks that have a doctorate but haven’t grown up through academia . . . are nontraditional.”

All of the search executives and presidents agree that a president who has come up through the Cohen and March path is traditional. As Sue May—partner at the executive search firm Storbeck Pimentel—puts it, “For a small liberal arts college, the traditional candidate is someone who’s come up through academic affairs, has served as the vice president of academic affairs or provost . . . at a very similar institution. That’s the highest comfort level you’ll see at an institution.”

Birnbaum (2002) has a different and more expanded definition of a traditional president that includes scholars (similar to March and Cohen) and stewards, who are defined as presidents who were not faculty but whose two previous jobs were in higher education. Nontraditional presidents are defined by Birnbaum as including “spanners”

who may or may not have been faculty but had one of their past two jobs in higher education, or “strangers” who have never been faculty and never worked in higher education. His study was published in 2002 but uses 1995 data for a cross-section of US colleges and universities.

Among the 12 presidents and search firm executives interviewed, it is fair to say that no one referenced the Birnbaum methodology, nor did anyone use the categorization language of scholar, spanner, or steward. However, there is clear agreement among search executives that someone who has no academic experience, no doctorate, and is a total stranger to higher education is nontraditional, like Birnbaum’s second nontraditional category. As Ellen Landers of Heidrick and Struggles puts it, “The most extreme definition of a nontraditional president would be someone who has no university or college experience and really only comes from the corporate world.” Sue May of Storbeck Pimentel broadly concurs, adding, “The broadest definition of a nontraditional would be someone who comes from outside academia, may not have a PhD, and have not spent time in academia at all.”

Nontraditional candidates who are complete strangers may face serious skepticism. David Bellshaw, partner at Isaacson Miller, warns, “If somebody is a ‘stranger to the academy,’ they’re usually a friend of the institution. You don’t go out and just randomly find some bank executive that’s going to run a little liberal college on the east or west coast. It just doesn’t work. They have no credibility.”

The American Council of Education does not use the traditional or nontraditional language directly in their regular Pathway to the Presidency studies, instead using the distinction of coming from outside higher education de facto as a proxy for a



nontraditional president. Some search executives use similar criteria. Shelly Storbeck, of the eponymous executive search firm Storbeck Pimentel, posits, “I define a nontraditional candidate as someone who is in a non-academic environment currently.”

There is thus agreement at either end of the spectrum, with the provost or department chair faculty as traditional, and the total stranger to higher education as a nontraditional. However, where the line is drawn in practice and what the nontraditional vernacular means to those selecting college presidents is highly nuanced and far from consistent. These nuances range from more to less restrictive definitions of what it means to be traditional or nontraditional, and lead to very different conclusions as to the number of nontraditional presidents there are.

One way of defining a nontraditional president is to define who they are not, in effect by defining a traditional president—like the Beardsley definition. The shades of gray in defining a traditional president relate to the degree of academic pedigree and experience a candidate has. Some feel that it is not necessary to climb the full academic ladder to be considered traditional, focusing instead on whether the candidate was ever or is currently in academe. Anne Coyle, of Storbeck Pimentel, argues, “A nontraditional candidate for a liberal arts college presidency is someone who is not currently a tenured faculty member at a college or university,” meaning that someone who long ago had tenure but then pursued a different career is a nontraditional. William Bowen, former president of Princeton University and an authority on higher education, reasoned, “A nontraditional candidate is one who hasn’t come through the faculty ranks.” Shelly Storbeck indicates that a selection “committee would define a nontraditional candidate as somebody who has never held academic rank or a tenure line position.” John Isaacson,

of the eponymous executive search firm Isaacson Miller, specifies that a faculty member who has had “a tenured track job and didn’t get tenure . . . [is] a nontraditional.”

Yet another way to define a nontraditional is to specify what their characteristics are. Several tiers or groups are considered by search executives to be nontraditional presidents. John Isaacson asserts that one nontraditional category “are people often with Ph.Ds. or who have started their careers in the academy, but then moved it somewhere else.” According to Sue May, one such nontraditional group is candidates who are not from the faculty ranks but “come from academia on the student affairs track, development or finance.”

Those who have been around a long time see change, more in the orientation of search committees, but not in the definition of a nontraditional. Long-time observer Dr. Bowen contends, “The practice has changed, but certainly not the definition.” With almost two decades of presidential searches under his belt, John Isaacson asserts that the definition of a nontraditional has “gotten more precise over time” and that 15-plus years ago a nontraditional was an “exotic idea.”

It is puzzling that search firms conducting almost all of the presidential searches cannot agree on exactly what a nontraditional president is. For one, potential misunderstandings can be created between stakeholders who think that they are talking about the same thing when they say “nontraditional.” Candidates can also be befuddled. Nontraditional president Larry Schall of Oglethorpe University in Atlanta suggests, “There are so many presidents that haven’t done [the traditional provost route] . . . that I think traditional and nontraditional is probably not the right terminology.”

These nuances in definition matter from a quantitative research point of view. A more restrictive definition of a traditional president would automatically increase the number of nontraditional presidents. Criteria that make it more difficult to be traditional—such as being a fully tenured faculty member, or currently being on the faculty, or having climbed the academic ladder to provost—increase the number of nontraditional presidents. Slightly broader traditional criteria—such as having once been on a faculty tenure track (whether or not achieved), or having at one time been a tenured faculty member (versus being one today)—decrease the number of nontraditional presidents.

As a reminder, this research defines a traditional president as someone who was at some point in his or her career on a full-time, tenured-faculty track, whether they received tenure, and whether or not they continued to climb the academic ladder to become a department chair or provost. Adjunct professors are not considered to be on a tenure track. Anyone who does not meet the criteria to become a traditional president is defined by this research as a nontraditional president; this is referred to as the Beardsley definition.

As explained in the research design section, the net effect of this research's less restrictive definition of being a traditional president is that it is more restrictive (i.e., difficult) for someone to be classified as a nontraditional president. To be comparable to Cohen and March, and the definitions used by most of the search executives, the number of traditional presidents in this research would be smaller than reported below (and the number of nontraditional presidents greater), as faculty who did not achieve tenure and/or

continue to be promoted to provost would need to be removed from the traditional president data and classified as a nontraditional.

## **2. Overall nontraditional presidential pathway characteristics**

Just as the landscape and context facing liberal arts institutions is quite varied, it should follow that the backgrounds and characteristics of their 248 presidents are too. Equally, it is expected that the norms for academic rigor—given the criticality of the intimate student-faculty relationship—result in a high bar for faculty academic achievement. The substantial challenges facing liberal arts college presidents in the current context are evolving but also highly varied when considered institution by institution. It should follow that the resulting profiles and backgrounds of the presidents that lead them are varied.

The quantitative analysis that follows seeks to find out the number and pathway characteristics of the current generation of nontraditional and traditional liberal arts presidents and their predecessors. Additionally, this population is compared with other presidential category studies of higher education overall. To provide insight into the characteristics of the current generation of presidents, I examine elements such as gender diversity, terminal degree achievement, and tenure in office to provide a sense of the current landscape of presidents.

### *Gender Diversity: Mirrors the University President Population Overall*

Gender diversity in leadership positions remains a challenge in higher education. Previous studies such as the ACE Pathways to the Presidency (2013), using data from 2007 and 2012, have documented that about one-fourth of college and university presidents are female, but that there have been small increases during the past five years.

However, these studies do not break down the percentage of female presidents in liberal arts colleges. Gender diversity for the past two liberal arts college president cohorts is shown in Table 18.

**Table 18. Gender Diversity among Liberal Arts College Presidents and Comparison versus the University President Population Overall**

Gender	Previous Cohort of Liberal Arts Presidents (%); n=206	ACE 2007 Overall President Study (%)	2014 Cohort of Liberal Arts Presidents (%); n=248	ACE 2012 Overall President Study (%)
Male	80	77	74	74
Female	20	23	26	26

Source: ACE 2012, 2013; Internet searches; USNWR Compass 2014 data

As of summer 2014, 26% of liberal arts college presidents were female, identical to the 74% observed in the ACE 2012 data of the total college and university president population. Compared to the previous cohort of liberal arts presidents, this represents a six-percentage-point increase, mirroring the small increase noted in the ACE studies.

This study did not seek to find the root cause of this gender inequality, but there are small signs of progress. The ratio of male to female liberal arts college presidents has moved from 4:1 to 3:1 across the past generation of presidents. Nevertheless, there remains a long path before gender equality will be achieved in the presidential ranks.

*Terminal Degree Achievement: A Doctorate Is Still the Prevalent Norm*

A presidency is the pinnacle of leadership achievement in higher education. As such, it makes sense that a president is expected to have academic credentials and an appreciation for the research that the faculty undertake on a regular basis. Tenured faculty are all expected to have doctoral degrees, and to conduct research, and it would thus not be surprising if they in turn expect their leader also to have a similar credential.

Among current liberal arts presidents, this is the case. Ninety-two percent of liberal arts presidents in 2014 have a doctoral degree, and 89 percent among their predecessors. The most prevalent doctorate is the PhD, outnumbering all other doctorates by a ratio of about 3:1. Having a doctoral degree would thus appear to remain a highly recommended and considered credential to become president at the vast majority of liberal arts colleges, although there are exceptions. The breakdown of terminal-degree achievement is shown in Table 19.

**Table 19. Overview of Doctorates Achieved by Liberal Arts College Presidents**

Liberal Arts Pres. Cohort	# Presidents Earning Doctorate (%)	# PhD (% of Doctorate)	# JD (% of Doctorates)	# Education Related (e.g., EdD); % Doctorates	# Other (% of docts)	Number Earning Two Doctorates
2014 Predecessor Generation (n=187)	167 (89)	130 (70)	15 (8)	16 (9)	9 (5)	3
2014 Presidents (n=248)	227 (92)	178 (72)	24 (10)	8 (3)	19 (8)	2

Source: Internet searches; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Note: This generation is not from any particular year. It is the presidents who preceded the president in office in June—whenever that transition took place.

*Tenure in Office: 2014 Generation of Liberal Arts Presidents' Tenure Is Low Overall*

Tenure in office is a variable that can be affected by many factors, including the age pyramid of past presidents, recent retirements, or differentiated context, to name but a few. Given the difficult context facing many liberal arts college presidents, a plausible hypothesis is that their tenure might be lower than the average college or university president. This turns out to be the case. However, there is quite some variation in the distribution. The average tenure of a 2014 liberal arts college president is 6.2 versus the

overall average computed by the ACE (2013) survey for all college and university presidents. An overview of tenure in office is shown in Table 20.

**Table 20. Distribution of Tenure in Office of 2014 Liberal Arts College Presidents**

N=248	Tenure (years)
Mean	6.2
Median	4.6
Range	0 to 46

Source: Internet searches; USNWR Compass 2014 data

The majority of 2014 liberal arts presidents have been in office less than five years. In fact, 49 presidents, or about one-fifth, had been in office less than or equal to one year as of June 2014, indicating that there has been a large refresh of presidents recently. On the other end of the spectrum, Norman Francis of Xavier University of Louisiana is an outlier; he was hired in 1968, so 2014 was his 46<sup>th</sup> year as president (he has since announced his retirement). It remains to be seen whether the final achieved tenure in office of this new generation of presidents will be shorter than their predecessors.

### **3. Number of nontraditional presidents**

The interviews with the search firm executives and the literature review have clearly established that there is no one accepted definition for what constitutes a nontraditional president. Nevertheless, it is helpful to establish a conservative estimate of just how prevalent nontraditional presidents have become in the liberal arts context, since there has never been a quantified analysis conducted recently on the entire population. The quantification in the analysis that follows uses the Beardsley definition.

*While Traditional Presidents Remain in the Majority, Nontraditional Liberal Arts Presidents Are Now Commonplace*

Among the current generation of stand-alone liberal arts college presidents, 33% of all presidents are nontraditional, while 67% are traditional per the Beardsley definition. Among the previous generation of liberal arts college presidents (whenever the transition took place), 38% are nontraditional, bringing the weighted average percentage of nontraditional presidents to 35 across the past two cohorts (Table 21, Illustration 3).

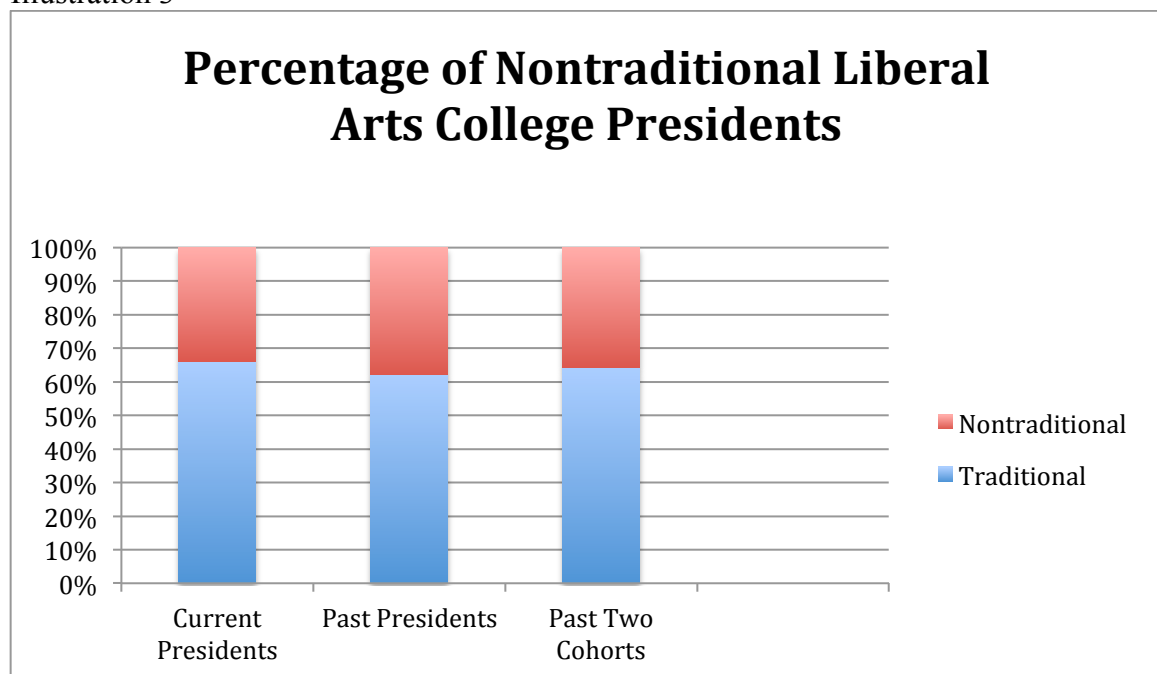
**Table 21. Number of Nontraditional Presidents: 2014 and Previous Cohort**

	2014 Current Liberal Arts Presidents	Previous Cohort Liberal Arts President	Past Two Cohorts Liberal Arts Pres.
Total	248	181	430
Nontraditional	83	68	153
Traditional	165	113	277

Source: Internet searches and analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Note that the time frame of the previous cohort varies since the transition of various presidencies takes place in different years.

Illustration 3



Source: Internet searches and analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data



The sample sizes are robust. For the current generation of liberal arts college presidents, of the 248 colleges, the sample of presidents is 248. For the previous generation, the sample size is 181 out of 248.

Clearly, and not surprisingly, the majority of liberal arts college presidents today continue to be from the traditional tenure-track faculty ranks. However, the number of nontraditional liberal arts presidents has risen during the past three to four decades from a very low single-digit base (exact data not available) to 33%, a dramatic change. Nontraditional presidents have become common and mainstream. Tenured faculty experience is clearly no longer a *sine qua non* requirement to be the president at a large number of liberal arts colleges. With either a more restrictive definition of a traditional president—à la Cohen and March—or the continuation of the long-term trend for another decade or so, it is possible that nontraditional presidents are or will soon represent the majority of standing liberal arts college presidents.

#### **4. Recruiting sources**

Fifty years ago the default recruiting ground for university and liberal arts college presidents was the internal faculty ranks. Since then the diversification of recruiting sources has multiplied and been well documented by organizations such as ACE that periodically conduct a survey across all university and college presidents. However, ACE does not break out liberal arts college presidential pathway data separately. Given the relatively large number of liberal arts colleges (248), it is expected that the liberal arts colleges recruiting sources will be as broadly diverse as universities in general.

To allow comparability with the ACE Pathway to the Presidency survey (2013) conducted periodically on all US college and university presidents, the liberal arts

presidential pathways data has been categorized for the presidents in June 2014, and their predecessor cohort accordingly. The ACE methodology examines the previous job held by a current college or university president. The previous job categories include: (1) College President; (2) Interim or Acting President; (3) Chief Academic Officer or Provost; (4) Other Academic Officer; (5) Non-academic Officer; (6) Department Chair or Faculty; and (7) Outside of Higher Education. Those coming from outside higher education are a quasi proxy for a nontraditional president, but they are not labeled by ACE as nontraditional. A further distinction is made between those who are first-time presidents and those who are not.

Liberal arts college presidents are recruited from a diversity of roles (Table 22). There is no typical pathway: within five categories of previous roles, each represents between 15 and 25% of the recruits.

**Table 22. Role from which Liberal Arts College Presidents Were Recruited**

Role Immediately Before Becoming President	Previous L.A. College President Cohort (n=184); %	2014 L.A. College President Cohort (n=235); %	ACE College President 2012 Data; %
President	17	16	20
Interim or Acting President	2	3	
Chief Academic Officer or Provost	15	19	57* (groups all officer categories)
Other Academic Officer	22	23	
Nonacademic Officer	16	20	
Chair or Faculty	7	4	4
Outside Higher Education	21	14	20

Source: ACE (2013); Internet searches and analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Not surprisingly, the largest source of presidential talent comes from higher education itself with 79 and 86% of past and current presidents, respectively, being

recruited from within the academy and the balance from outside higher education. However, presidents are selected from a diverse set of roles within higher education. Nineteen percent of the 2014 cohort of liberal arts college presidents was recruited from president or interim president roles, and the same percentage from the chief academic officer or provost position. However, other academic officers (e.g., dean of a school of arts and sciences) were the largest segment of previous roles at 23%, and nonacademic officers (e.g., dean of students) at 20% were also a slightly bigger source of talent.

If these data were to adopt a previous convention from a few decades ago as saying a typical or traditional president came from a president or provost role, then 62% of the 2014 cohort of liberal arts presidents do not meet this definition. Thirty-five percent of the 2014 cohort, and 37% of the predecessor cohort, was recruited from non-academic roles and/or from outside higher education. For these predecessors, those recruited from nonacademic roles and/or from outside higher education are more than double those recruited from the provost and/or chief academic officer position.

## **5. Trends between presidential cohorts**

The previous role distribution for the 2014 cohort of liberal arts presidents versus their predecessors is broadly similar with a couple of notable exceptions. First, the 2014 cohort has four percentage points higher come from the provost and nonacademic officer role than their predecessors. Second, and perhaps more significantly, the 2014 cohort has a seven-percentage-point smaller number of its presidents coming directly from outside higher education versus the predecessor cohort. The research cannot definitively explain the cause of this difference. One possible explanation for the difference is the difference in sample size. The predecessor cohort has previous role data for 184 presidents (and

thus 64 missing data points), versus 235 (13 data points) in the 2014 cohort. The presidents with missing data in the predecessor cohort have a longer average tenure than those in the sample, and it is plausible that they are more likely to have come from inside higher education given historical trends. This could reduce the gap to a perhaps insignificant amount, although by how much exactly remains to be seen.

## **6. Comparison of liberal arts presidents to ACE data**

The ACE On the Pathway to the Presidency 2013 report says, “According to the American College President 2012, twenty percent of presidents came directly from a position outside academe. Another 20 percent came to their current presidency after leading another institution and 4 percent moved directly from a faculty or department chair position” (p. 5). Compared with the 2014 cohort of liberal arts college presidents, the percentage of presidents coming directly from a faculty or department chair background is the same at 4%. However, liberal arts presidents from the 2014 cohort are recruited directly from another presidency 20% less than the typical university or college president. Further, the typical college president in the ACE 2013 survey (using 2012 data) is 43% more likely than a liberal arts president in the 2014 cohort to have been recruited directly from outside higher education. Thus, the typical liberal arts college president in 2014 is more likely to be directly recruited from a non-faculty, non-presidential senior leadership position within higher education than the typical college or university president.

*Pathways to the Presidency for First-Time Presidents in a Liberal Arts Context Are Substantially Different from the Typical US College and University President*

Aspirants to a college or university presidency often wonder what the best pathway is to secure their first presidency. The ACE On the Pathway to the Presidency 2013 study has clearly shown that there is no one preferred path for a first-time presidency. However, using the ACE 2013 Pathways to the Presidency methodology, a comparison of the previous job (and thus the recruiting source) of first-time presidents shows that those in the liberal arts are much more likely to be recruited from other academic officer or non-academic officer positions, such as a dean, and much less likely to be recruited from a provost or chief academic officer position, than the national average of all presidents (Table 23).

**Table 23. Recruiting Source and Previous Job for First-Time Presidents**

Role Immediately Before Becoming President	Previous L.A. College President Cohort (n=148); %	2014 L.A. College President Cohort (n=190); %	ACE 2012 First-Time President Data; %
Provost or CAO	19	24	44
Other Academic Officer	27	29	13
Nonacademic Officer	20	25	16
Chair or Faculty	8	5	4
Outside Higher Ed	26	17	23

Source: ACE 2013; Internet searches and analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

In fact, first-time presidents in the liberal arts were more than twice as likely to be selected from an “other academic officer” position such as a dean of arts and sciences position than the average first-time university president, and for the 2014 cohort 56% more likely to be recruited from a nonacademic officer position such as an executive vice president of administration or dean of students. Conversely, they were 45% less

likely than the average president to be recruited from the provost or chief academic officer ranks.

The number of first-time liberal arts presidents recruited from outside higher education is in a comparable range, with 18% of the 2014 cohort and 26% of the previous cohort (weighted average of the two cohorts of 22%) compared to 23% of the overall university president profile. Overall, the typical university president of the 2013 ACE study has been directly recruited from a nonacademic position (nonacademic officers and outside higher education) four and six percentage points less than the 2014 and predecessor cohorts respectively at liberal arts colleges.

The decrease from 26 to 18% in the percentage directly recruited from outside higher education between the previous first-time liberal arts president cohort and the current cohort is notable, but the research cannot determine if this is a definite trend. Part of this variation could be due to differences in sample size (150 versus 189) and also variations in missing data. For instance, only 120 schools have ACE data for both cohorts.

## **7. Comparison to Birnbaum findings**

As a reminder, Birnbaum, recognizing that pathways were increasingly segmented, created a different definition of a traditional president as including scholars (similar to March and Cohen) and stewards who were presidents but were never faculty and whose two previous jobs were in higher education. Nontraditional presidents are defined by Birnbaum as including “spanners” who may or may not have been faculty but had one of their past two jobs in higher education, or “strangers” who have never been faculty and never worked in higher education. His study was published in 2002 but uses

1995 data for a cross-section of US colleges and universities. The most comparable subset of his data is the baccalaureate colleges that include many of the liberal arts colleges but also many others. Additionally, a contrast of the liberal arts presidents to the average college or university president is also instructive. Nontraditional presidents are substantially more prevalent in the 2014 cohort of all liberal arts presidents than they were in Birnbaum's survey using data from almost two decades previously. The data is summarized in Table 24.

**Table 24. Comparison of 2014 Traditional and Nontraditional Liberal Arts Presidents versus the Birnbaum Study (2002)**

<b>Birnbaum Category</b>	Birnbaum: Baccalaureate Colleges (% from 1995 data)	Birnbaum: All Colleges and Universities (% from 1995 data)	2014 Liberal Arts College President Cohort (%); n=236
Scholar	62.4	66.3	59.3
Steward	23.3	22.4	19.5
<b>Traditional Total</b>	<b>85.7</b>	<b>88.7</b>	<b>78.8</b>
Spanner	10.3	7.4	13.6
Stranger	4.1	3.9	7.6
<b>Nontraditional Total</b>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>11.3</b>	<b>21.2</b>

Source: Birnbaum (2002); Internet analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

The most striking finding is that the number of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents in 2014, per the Birnbaum definition, is almost double at 88% higher than the average of all presidents two decades ago. The number of liberal arts strangers is 95% higher than Birnbaum's survey, and the number of spanners is 84% higher. Although these percentage increases are high and notable, they come from a small base. The

number of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents, per the Birnbaum definition, in 2014 is 21%, meaning traditional liberal arts presidents in 2014 per the Birnbaum definition outnumber nontraditional presidents almost four to one.

When comparing the liberal arts presidents of today versus the baccalaureate group of Birnbaum, the trends are similar but more muted. The percentage of nontraditional liberal arts presidents today is 47% higher than at the baccalaureate colleges two decades previously. There is little change in the proportional mix of traditional presidents.

It is important to remember that this definition of a “traditional” president is substantially different than the Beardsley definition used by this research. For instance, someone who has had full-time, tenure-track faculty experience is considered to be “traditional” by the Beardsley definition, but can be considered a “nontraditional” by Birnbaum if one of two previous jobs was outside higher education. Alternatively, someone whose previous two jobs were in higher education is considered to be traditional by Birnbaum, whether or not he or she was ever on a faculty tenure track.

## **8. Other characteristics of nontraditional presidents**

As with any population, the averages can mask meaningful variation that may exist underneath the surface. To ascertain whether or not nontraditional liberal arts presidents exhibit any differences versus their traditional counterparts, I will compare gender, tenure in office, and likelihood to follow a traditional or nontraditional predecessor. Using the Beardsley definition of a nontraditional president, the differences are significant and striking.



*Women Are Substantially Less Likely to Be a Nontraditional Liberal Arts President than a Traditional President*

Of the 248 liberal arts presidents in 2014, 25% are women. However, it is unclear from this statistic whether there is any meaningful variation in gender diversity between the traditional and nontraditional presidents. Analysis indicates that, proportionately, women are 63% more likely to be a traditional liberal arts president than a nontraditional one. The data is summarized in Table 25.

**Table 25. Gender Diversity of 2014 Liberal Arts Presidents for Traditional versus Nontraditional**

Gender (n=248)	Nontraditional (%)	Traditional (%)
Female	17.9	29.2
Male	82.1	70.8

Source: Internet searches and analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Although the cause of this situation is unclear and is not the focus of this research, a few things can be said. First, a greater percentage of traditional versus nontraditional presidents are women. Second, the number of male presidents dwarfs the absolute number of women presidents. Third, the ratio of male to female liberal arts nontraditional presidents is 4.6:1 versus 2.4:1 for a traditional liberal arts president. This might indicate that the academy prepares either a great number of traditional female candidates or that the female candidates it presents are better prepared and/or qualified. Equally, it may indicate a dearth of female nontraditional candidates or that, for some reason, nontraditional female candidates find it more difficult to be selected. The available number of candidates and success rates are not part of this research.

*Tenure for a Nontraditional Liberal Arts College President Is Longer Than a Traditional President*

It has already been established that the average tenure for a liberal arts college president in 2014 is lower than the average for all college presidents was in 2012.

However, it is unclear whether or not a nontraditional liberal arts president has a longer average tenure than that person's traditional counterparts. An analysis of the data set shown in Table 26 indicates that both the mean and median tenure for a nontraditional president is meaningfully longer than a traditional president.

**Table 26. Distribution of Tenure of 2014 Traditional versus Nontraditional Liberal Arts College Presidents**

	All 2014 L.A. Presidents (years) N=248	2014 Traditional L.A. Presidents n=164	2014 Nontraditional L.A. Presidents n=84
Mean	6.2	5.2	8.3
Median	4.6	3.9	6.8
Range	0 to 45.9	0 to 39	0 to 45.9

Source: Internet analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

As of 2014, nontraditional presidents' mean tenure was 8.3 years and the median tenure 6.9 years—three or more years longer than the traditional presidents. The research does not determine the root cause of these meaningful differences; and it is possible, albeit unlikely, that these tenure numbers could converge over time as the careers of a large number of low-tenure presidents continue their careers. However, should the current tenure differences continue, it is clear that over time the number and percentage of nontraditional presidents would mechanically and substantially increase even if the

percentage recruited each year would stay constant, given the higher apparent attrition of traditional presidents.

*Predecessor Characteristics: Nontraditional Presidents Are More Likely to Follow a Traditional Predecessor Than a Nontraditional Predecessor*

Given the relatively recent emergence of nontraditional presidents during the past few decades, for many institutions it is a measured risk to take the step to head in a new direction. Although this research does not seek to determine whether or not nontraditional presidents outperform their nontraditional counterparts, in some sense a college's selection process of president could be a proxy for satisfaction with a traditional or nontraditional type. In a search to replace a predecessor, some institutions may prefer to continue with a traditional or nontraditional president; some may wish to alternate. Analysis of those liberal arts colleges' current and predecessor type indicate that proportionately 2014 nontraditional liberal arts college presidents are 25% more likely to follow a traditional predecessor than they are to follow a nontraditional predecessor, whereas a traditional liberal arts college president is just over 10% more likely to follow a nontraditional predecessor than to follow a traditional predecessor. Table 27 summarizes the analysis.

**Table 27. Likelihood of Current Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts President to Follow Nontraditional or Traditional Predecessor, by Predecessor Type**

L.A. College President Predecessor Type	2014 L.A. College Traditional Presidents (%); n=113	2014 L.A. College Nontraditional Presidents (%); n=68	Total (%); n=181
Traditional	65	35	100
Nontraditional	72	28	100

Source: USNWR Compass 2014 data; Internet searches and analysis

It is equally clear that many institutions are deciding to alternate between traditional and nontraditional president profiles. Among the 2014 liberal arts college presidents selected, 49% alternated from a traditional to a nontraditional president or vice versa, and 51% kept the same profile. This may be an indication that many institutions use the selection process to pursue a form of change embodied by the type of president they select, and that this can oscillate back and forth over time.

*Previous Ties: Nontraditional Presidents Are Often Alumni, Employees, or Board Members of the Institutions That Select Them*

Just like any industry or profession, higher education has its own specificities, norms, language, and processes that presidents must learn to navigate. Those coming through the traditional path are fully accustomed to many of these norms, but given the shared governance processes that are deployed by selection committees, nontraditional candidates have to find a way to ensure that they can understand and operate in a culture where faculty are the lifeblood of the enterprise. Indeed, the number of presidents who are complete strangers to higher education remains less than 10%. One way to demonstrate understanding of an institution, to become familiar with the culture, and provide a bridge to the faculty, is to establish a relationship with it. For a nontraditional president aspirant, this could take the form of being an alumnus, an employee, or even a board member; and just over one-third of 2014 liberal arts nontraditional presidents met one of these criteria. The analysis is summarized in Table 28.

**Table 28: Previous Institutional Ties of Liberal Arts Presidents**

N=84	Previous Employment or Board Member? Number (%)	Alumnus? Number (%)	Both? Number (%)	Either? Number (%)
Yes	17 (20)	21 (25)	9 (11)	29 (34.5)
No	67 (80)	63 (75)	75 (89)	55 (65.5)

Source: Internet searches and analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Although just over a third of nontraditional presidents had a previous relationship with the institution they lead, it is equally important to note that 65% did not. This means that while a prior relationship may indeed be helpful, it is not a requirement for a nontraditional aspirant. The analysis also does not reveal the presidential search process success rates of candidates with a prior relationship or not. A prior relationship is far from a guarantee of success, but it is clearly not a hindrance either.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Characteristics of Liberal Arts Colleges That Select Nontraditional Presidents**

I have explored and characterized the liberal arts context on multiple dimensions including size, religious affiliation, endowment, geography, financial metrics and trends, selectivity, yield, public versus private affiliation, and ranking. I also have looked at the numbers of nontraditional liberal arts presidents, their backgrounds, and trends. But what are the characteristics of the liberal arts colleges that are willing to break with tradition and hire a nontraditional president? To get at this question, I have used a two-pronged approach. First, the search firm executives who carry out the vast majority of liberal arts presidential searches were asked this question. Second, a quantitative analysis combining characteristics of liberal arts institutions with the presence of a nontraditional or traditional president has been conducted using the Beardsley definition of a nontraditional president.

#### **1. Search firm executives' viewpoints on characteristics**

Executive search firms are now involved in the vast majority of all liberal arts college presidency searches, a trend that has emerged progressively since the 1980s. In a given search, they often help to write the position profile after interviewing stakeholders, receive and sort the various candidate papers submitted, and work intimately with the selection committees and candidates in virtually all stages of the search right through contract negotiation. Selection committees and candidates often turn to search firm executives as a source of outside, objective advice, and to frame choices. The best search executives, behind the scenes, are often counselors to candidates, boards, or presidents and thought leaders on higher education and have closely guarded but extensive

rolodexes of possible candidates. Given this unique perch, the executives were asked to answer the question, “What are the characteristics of liberal arts institutions that are most likely to hire a nontraditional president?”

What is perhaps most striking in the answers is what was not said. None of the search executives mentioned size, religious affiliation, geography, public versus private, graduation rate, type of predecessor, endowment, or selectivity as specific variables that discern who is likely to hire a nontraditional president. Although no one was pressed to guess a specific percentage of nontraditional presidents, it would be fair to say the sentiment of those who commented was that it is on the small side but rising.

It is also noteworthy that the search executives did not have a uniform point of view, suggesting that search executives’ individual experiences actually vary depending on the higher education clients they serve, or possibly that their own beliefs and biases differ in fundamentally different ways. Nevertheless, the search firm executives identified four characteristics that in their experience increase the likelihood of a liberal arts college to hire a nontraditional president: (1) ranking; (2) higher propensity for risk taking and desire for change and transformation; (3) a crisis; and (4) colleges where the board is running the selection process (and the faculty isn’t).

*Ranking Is a Key Determinant of Selecting a Nontraditional President, But There Is Disagreement on Where in the Rankings*

Ranking is a variable that encompasses many factors, including endowment, selectivity, graduation, and reputation, among others. Despite the controversy that surrounds ranking, and the various ranking algorithms that exist across competing ranking services, the truth remains that students, parents, alumni, college presidents,

and boards look at rankings to some extent as a barometer of how they are doing. Several search executives answered by first saying that it is the elite schools that are the least likely to hire a nontraditional. Others answered by splitting the groups into tiers and most, but not all, felt that beyond the top tier, the likelihood of hiring a nontraditional increased. Yet others did not mention ranking as being the salient characteristic determining the hiring of a nontraditional.

Some search executives see a difference between the top-ten-ranked schools and the next tranche of highly rated schools. Shelly Storbeck explained the phenomenon in this way: “If you’re in the top ten of *US News & World Report*, let’s say, for the most part, and there are exceptions—Barry Mills [of Bowdoin] being one of them—those campuses are really going to push hard to have a traditional candidate. . . . If you’re in the 10 to 30 range there’s probably going to be a little more variety in the profile. And then when you drift down to 50 and below, you’ll see all kinds of candidates.”

Why a top-ranked school might be less likely to hire a nontraditional could simply be a function of tradition, inertia, or risk avoidance. After all, some of the highest-ranked schools have very large endowments and must be doing something right to be so highly regarded. Some search executives cited this line of reasoning. Said Ellen Landers, “At the top ranks they can usually find good traditional candidates who’ve been there and done that before. They are less pressed to be creative. Why wouldn’t they go with somebody who’s proven in their environment? That’s your less risky choice. . . . If you’re in the middle to the lower tier you’re probably open to a little bit more risk and your needs are probably more significant.”



However, not all search executives saw the world as simply as the higher ranked being less likely to hire a nontraditional and those below the top 20% being more likely. David Bellshaw's experience underlines this point. "I find that the lower . . . you get into the rankings . . . they are more hesitant about taking a nontraditional candidate because they are so worried about their reputation that they want a high-flying academic . . . to show they're intellectually making the right moves." It is worth noting that these seemingly conflicting points of view could be right at the same time given the search executives' own experiences and lack of ability to judge the entire liberal arts college president landscape.

*Risk Takers and Colleges Desiring Change and Transformation More Likely to Have a Nontraditional President*

One way to think about a college president search is to forget about ranking and to divide colleges into two camps: those that desire change and transformation and/or are willing to take a risk, and those that are more or less happy with the status quo. In fact, for many search executives a nontraditional president is synonymous with change and transformation, thus implying a certain degree of risk taking on behalf of the institution. That a liberal arts institution which has successfully delivered a quality education for decades or even centuries might perceive a first turn toward a nontraditional president to be a risk is understandable.

For some search executives, risk is a defining characteristic. Shelly Storbeck said the types of institutions that hire a nontraditional president "have to be risk takers. It can't just be about 'polishing the stone.' Those that have hunger for change and

transformation, that's the kind of institution that will very eagerly embrace a nontraditional."

For others, the defining characteristic is a mix of worry and risk balanced against inertia. Anne Coyle's experience has been that "institutions who are anxious enough about their own future, that are willing to take risk, . . . are more likely to hire a nontraditional candidate. Those that are more eager to maintain their good standing, they are likely to go with the traditional candidate that will keep things on the same path and perhaps make incremental, non-painful changes."

*Some Search Executives View Fear or Crisis as the Catalyst for Selecting a Nontraditional President*

For some search executives, a nontraditional president choice is synonymous with a big problem. Somewhat related to the desire to transform the status quo can be fear or a crisis that creates the "burning platform" for change. This could be a scandal, but for many liberal arts colleges today, it is often about financial pressure and worry about the long-term viability of their enterprise. As John Isaacson put it, the type of liberal arts college that hires a nontraditional president is simply "a terrified one." He explained, "They have economic model problems they can't escape and their faculty's power is greatly reduced. So they're going to be open to people who say we have to have different product lines."

Why a nontraditional president is best suited to a crisis or a fear-filled situation is unclear from the interviews. One possible reason is that a nontraditional candidate may have had experience outside of academe in executing change. Another could be that the institution feels the need for change and that the best way to symbolize that change is by

breaking with tradition and picking a nonacademic to lead the institution. A further plausible explanation is that an internal, traditional candidate might find it difficult to change the very institution and friends they have worked with for many years.

Whatever the reason, some search executives have seen a correlation between big problems and the likelihood to hire a nontraditional candidate. Sue May's experience is that the type of liberal arts institution that hires a nontraditional is often "a college that is in crisis . . . like Birmingham Southern where they hired a former general at a dollar a year in salary; he made a lot of really tough calls in the wake of a financial aid kind of scandal there."

*Search Executives See Institutions Where Decision-making Power Has Shifted Away from Faculty to Boards as More Likely to Hire Nontraditional Presidents*

In many ways it should come as no surprise that the composition of the selection committee and the ultimate decision-making authorities may influence the bias and thus outcome of the selection of a college president. In the shared governance environment that liberal arts colleges use, the voice of faculty is rightfully strong, but it is not the only voice. In the past it appears that the selection of a college president, the person who has strong influence on tenure decisions, was a designation of a sort of *primus inter pares* among the faculty. However, in many institutions today the decision to hire a president is no longer the faculty's unique prerogative. Search firm executives' experience indicates that the decision-making politics can strongly increase the likelihood of a nontraditional president's selection, particularly where the faculty's voice is better balanced with a strong board.

Some indicate that it is not the financial crisis per se, but that financial concerns have changed the decision-making process. Ken Kring explained that “it’s driven largely by a shift in the decision-making dynamics, where boards of trustees are empowered because of financial challenges and are able . . . to step further into succession planning because of the consequences of the financial model being threatening to the institution.”

For many institutions, the default mode is to select a traditional candidate, because that is what they have always done. Along these lines, Anne Coyle related, “Faculty in general are change-resistant types.” To change that *modus operandi*, a catalyst appears to be the actual composition of the selection committee. Jackie Zavitch supports this point of view and argued that the “selection committee profile is key. . . . Personalities at the top, and that means the board and the faculty, both [need] to have a willingness.” Another search executive, Sue May, has had a similar experience. “A lot of it has to do with the nature of shared governance and the dynamics of the board and the dynamics of the faculty. If the board is running the show, you’re more likely to end up with a nontraditional.”

There was no consensus as to which types of liberal arts colleges have the characteristic of having an open-minded selection committee. David Bellshaw posits that the boards at higher-ranked colleges wield more presidential selection decision power because they have often generated substantial wealth for the college and are thus more likely to hire a nontraditional versus “more middle ground boards [that]) may be less prominent, more insecure, more worried about reputation, more worried about what it is that they’re signaling to their friends and colleagues.”

## **2. Characteristics of liberal arts colleges more likely to hire nontraditional presidents**

Search executives have identified a few variables that in their experience influence the likelihood of selecting a nontraditional president. To provide comparability, the quantitative analysis attempts to examine as many of the variables stated as possible. For instance, I analyze ranking. As a proxy for the appetite for change, and or a crisis, I also examine financial strength variables. It was not possible in this research to ascertain how a selection committee's composition affects hiring a nontraditional president quantitatively.

However, it is also possible that there are characteristics that were not cited by search executives that can meaningfully distinguish between those institutions that hire a liberal arts nontraditional president and those that do not. To this end, the quantitative analysis seeks to determine if religious affiliation, public-versus-private orientation, size, graduation rate, selectivity, or geography meaningfully differentiate those that are more likely to have a nontraditional president.

### *Religiously Affiliated Colleges Are Significantly More Likely to Select Nontraditional Presidents*

Just under half of today's liberal arts colleges are identified as having a religious affiliation. This does not mean that they are per se religious, or that across the board they only admit students from the religion with which they are affiliated. Almost all are accepting of students and staff from all walks of life and religious beliefs. Yet the culture and mission of the institution is often strongly influenced and inspired by the values of its religious affiliation. In some of these institutions, preference may be given to

presidential candidates from that denomination, potentially trumping in certain cases the need to be a faculty member and opening the door to nontraditional candidates who may be a minister or priest, for example. The analysis indicates that in 2014 religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges were 49% more likely to have a nontraditional president than a college with no religious affiliation. Table 29 shows the distribution of type of president by religious affiliation.

**Table 29. 2014 Number and Percent of Traditional and Nontraditional Presidents by Liberal Arts College Religious Affiliation**

Liberal Arts College Religious Affiliation? N=248	Traditional President (#)	Nontraditional President (#)	Traditional President (%)	Nontraditional President (%)
Yes. Religious Affiliation (n=119)	71	48	59.7	40.3
No. Religious Affiliation (n=129)	94	35	72.9	27.1
Total (n=248)	165	83	66.5	33.5

Source: Internet searches and analysis; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Even among religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges, about 60% of their leaders are traditional, still the majority. However, with 40% of religiously affiliated colleges having a nontraditional leader, it is clear that one indicator of increased likelihood of hiring a nontraditional president is religious affiliation. An example of a nontraditional liberal arts president who matches this description is Dr. Rex Home of Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas. Prior to being president, he was a senior pastor and prior to that he was president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention and a trustee at the university.

*Graduation Rate: Lower Graduation Rates Increase the Likelihood of Having a Nontraditional President*

One way to consider segments of liberal arts colleges is by examining outcomes as measured by six-year graduation rates. Higher graduation rates are found at “medallion” (above 80%) and “brand name” (68 to 80%) institutions, and lower graduation rates at “good buy” (50 to 68%) and “good opportunity” (20 to 50%) institutions (Zemsky, 2001). Analysis reveals that graduation rate and the associated institutional segmentation is a meaningful characteristic that differentiates how many nontraditional presidents there were in 2014. Table 30 shows the distribution of nontraditional presidents by graduation rate.

**Table 30. 2014 Distribution of Traditional and Nontraditional Presidents by Graduation Rate Segment**

Segment Name (6-Year Graduation Rate %); n=244	2014 Traditional Presidents #	2014 Nontraditional Presidents #	2014 L.A. Traditional President (%)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional President (%)
Medallion ( $\geq 80$ ); n=66	51	15	77	23
Name Brand ( $68 \leq x < 80$ ); n=60	47	13	78	22
Good Buy ( $50 \leq x < 68$ ); n=66	32	34	48	52
Good Opportunity ( $20 \leq x < 50$ ); n=46	27	19	59	41
Below Segmentation Standard ( $< 20\%$ ); n=6	5	1	83	17

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; Robert Zemsky (2001); USNWR Compass 2014 data

“Good buy” and “good opportunity” segments representing the lower two graduation-rate thresholds have a 72% higher chance of having a nontraditional president than the higher-graduation-rate “medallion” and “brand name” segments. Of specific note is that the “good buy” segment has more nontraditional presidents than traditional presidents and that the “good buy” segment is 2.26 times more likely to have a nontraditional president than a “medallion” college. However, a “good opportunity” segment is less likely to have a nontraditional president than a “good buy” segment, showing that the relationship between graduation rate and a nontraditional president is not uniformly higher as graduation rate declines.

One rationale to explain the lower propensity of a nontraditional president in higher-graduation-rate colleges could be that higher graduation rates are often indicative of a well-performing enterprise, with a more academically capable student body, and a high standard of academic rigor delivered by more demanding faculty. Since a president is supposed to embody the brand of the institution, it may be that a nontraditional president lacking full-time faculty credentials finds it difficult to convince faculty that trying something different is necessary. Conversely, a “good buy” institution with a graduation rate between 50 and 68% may be less sensitive to faculty pedigree and more open minded to considering different profiles to improve its outcomes. Nevertheless, the research cannot explain exactly why the segments have different propensities to have a nontraditional president. What is clear, however, is that in 2014 the top two graduation-rate segment colleges had a substantially lower likelihood of having a nontraditional president than the lower-graduation-rate segments.



*Public versus Private: No Difference in Likelihood of Nontraditional Presidents at Public versus Private Liberal Arts Colleges*

In 2014 just under 10% of stand-alone liberal arts college were public institutions. Some are among the most elite, including the United States Military Academy, the United States Naval Academy, and the United States Air Force Academy. Others are state owned such as the University of Maine–Machias or the University of Hawaii–Hilo. There is no particular factor that has been identified as to why a public liberal arts institution might be more or less likely to hire a nontraditional president than a private institution. Analysis shows that the likelihood of being a nontraditional president at a public or private liberal arts institution was the same in 2014. Thus, the characteristic of being a public or private liberal arts college does not influence the likelihood of selecting a nontraditional president and is shown in Table 31.

**Table 31. 2014 Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts Presidents for Private versus Public Liberal Arts Colleges**

<b>Type of Liberal Arts College</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)</b>
Private (n=221)	147	74	66.5	33.5
Public (n=27)	18	9	66.7	33.3
<b>Total (n= 248)</b>	165	83	33.5	66.5

Source: Internet searches and analysis; USNWR 2014 Compass data

*Size Matters: Smaller Institutions Are More Likely to Have a Nontraditional President*

There are many ways to measure size. For the purposes of assessing whether larger or smaller liberal arts institutions are more likely to have a nontraditional president, I examine size by the number of students, the number of staff employed at the institution, and the total core expense budget. I cover the size of an institution's endowment separately.

The number of FTE students enrolled at a liberal arts college varies almost 100-fold from the smallest to the largest institution. However, it is not clear how size might uniformly influence the choice of a nontraditional president. Yet, the analysis shows a clear relationship between the number of students and the propensity for a nontraditional president in 2014, as summarized in Table 32.

**Table 32. Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts College Presidents by Number of Students**

<b>Size Quartile Total FTE Enrollment 2012–2013 IPEDS</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> quartile— smallest (from 93 to 983 FTE); n=61	37	24	60.1	38.9
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile (from 989 to 1646 FTE); n=61	38	23	62.3	37.7
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile (from 1647 to 2316 FTE); n=61	46	15	75.4	24.6
4 <sup>th</sup> quartile— biggest (from 2346 to 7445 FTE); n=62	42	20	67.7	32.3
<b>Total (n=245)</b>	163	82	66.5	33.5

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

In 2014, the two quartiles representing the bottom half of smaller institutions, as measured by number of students, are about 35% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the upper two quartiles of the biggest institutions. However, the percentage of nontraditional presidents does not uniformly decrease with size as measured by students, with the largest quartile having one-third more nontraditional

presidents than the third quartile. What remains true is that smaller liberal arts institutions, as measured by number of students, had a greater concentration of nontraditional presidents than bigger ones in 2014.

Similar to the number of students, the number of staff employed by a liberal arts institution varies about 80-fold from smallest to largest. Yet the analysis shows a clear relationship between the number of staff and the propensity to have a nontraditional president in 2014; see Table 33.

**Table 33. Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts College Presidents by Number of Staff**

<b>Size Quartile Total Staff FTE 2012– 2013 IPEDS</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)</b>	<b>2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> quartile— smallest (from 21 to 249 FTE); n=61	38	23	62.3	37.7
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile (from 250 to 368 FTE); n=61	38	23	62.3	37.7
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile (from 374 to 584 FTE); n=61	42	19	68.9	31.1
4 <sup>th</sup> quartile— biggest (from 584 to 1650 FTE); n=61	45	16	63.8	26.2
<b>Total (n=244)</b>	163	81	66.8	33.2

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

In 2014 the two quartiles representing the bottom half of smaller institutions, as measured by number of staff, are 31.4% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the upper two quartiles of the biggest institutions. However, the percentage of

nontraditional presidents does broadly decrease with size as measured by staff, with the third quartile having 31% more nontraditional presidents than the fourth quartile.

Another way to consider size is to examine the size of the resources an institution can spend in a given year. One metric that can be used to ascertain this aspect of size is core expenses. Core expenses include the operating budget of a school and virtually all salaries and operating expenses; they also include financial aid grants. Given that some colleges have vastly greater endowments and wealth than others, and thus can spend more on salaries and other items, expenses vary even more widely as a measure of size than number of students or staff. In fact, the largest expense budget is more than 220 times larger than the smallest. Analysis shows that smaller-budget liberal arts colleges are more likely to have a nontraditional president than bigger-budget peers; see Table 34.

**Table 34. 2014 Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts College Presidents by Core Expense Budget**

Size Quartile Total Core Expense Budget (\$ millions) 2012– 2013 IPEDS	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)
1 <sup>st</sup> quartile— smallest (from 2.4 to 25.3 FTE); n=61	37	24	60.7	39.3
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile (from 25.4 to 42.7); n=61	37	24	60.7	39.3
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile (from 42.9 to 73); n=61	43	18	70.5	29.5
4 <sup>th</sup> quartile— biggest (from 73.2 to 532.3 FTE); n=62	46	16	74.2	25.8
<b>Total (n=245)</b>	163	82	66.5	33.5

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

In 2014 the two quartiles representing the bottom half of smaller institutions, as measured by core expenses, are 42.4% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the upper two quartiles of the biggest institutions. Interestingly, the first and second quartiles are 52.3% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the richest top quartile.

Why a smaller institution might be more likely to hire a nontraditional president, or why a larger institution might be more likely to hire a traditional president, is unclear from the research. One rationale could be that at smaller institutions, the Board of Trustees may have proportionately more power than at larger institutions and thus exercise the discretion to hire a nontraditional candidate. Conversely, at larger institutions there are more faculty who have a voice in selecting the president, potentially making the path for a nontraditional candidate more difficult if faculty demand a scholar or, conversely, raise the bar for a nontraditional candidate to understand the faculty culture. Further, a plausible explanation could be that institutions with substantially larger resources, particularly from a budgetary point of view, might have more latitude to consider only traditional candidates should they so desire. If one were to believe that faculty voice and influence in presidential selection is greater in bigger institutions, and slanted toward favoring traditional candidates, this could be an explanation. This analysis cannot conclude this causal link, however, and there are examples of traditional and nontraditional presidents in institutions of all sizes. What remains true is that smaller liberal arts institutions—as measured by students, staff, or expense budget—had a greater concentration of nontraditional presidents than bigger liberal arts institutions in 2014.

*Selectivity: Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts College Presidents by Acceptance Rate*

Liberal arts colleges vary highly in selectivity—from less than 10% of applicants admitted to open admission. Analysis reveals that acceptance rate is a meaningful characteristic that differentiated the likelihood of having a nontraditional president in 2014. Table 35 shows the distribution of nontraditional presidents by selectivity quartile.

**Table 35. 2014 Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts College Presidents by 2013 Acceptance Rate**

Selectivity Quartile 2012–2013 Acceptance Rate	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)
1 <sup>st</sup> quartile—most selective (from 6.8 to 41%); n=58	46	12	79.3	20.7
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile (from 41.1 to 62.2%); n=58	36	22	62.1	37.9
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile (from 62.3 to 72.1%); n=58	32	26	55.2	44.8
4 <sup>th</sup> quartile—least selective (from 72.2 to 98.3%); n=59	39	20	66.1	33.9
<b>Total (n=233)</b>	153	80	65.7	34.3

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR 2014 Compass data

The least three selective quartiles are 88% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the most selective quartile. In other words, the most selective liberal arts colleges are significantly more likely to have a traditional president. The third quartile, with the percentage of applicants selected between 62 and 72%, is more than twice as likely to have a nontraditional president than the most selective quartile. However, the

propensity to have a nontraditional president does not uniformly increase across all quartiles, with the least selective quartile having a lower percentage of nontraditional presidents than the more selective third quartile.

*Yield: Colleges That Have Lower Yield Are More Likely to Have a Nontraditional President Than Those with Higher Yield*

Just because a college admits a student, that doesn't mean the student will attend. The percentage of admitted students that enroll is called yield. A higher yield rate—say, above 35%—is usually a good indication of either an attractive school and/or a school that admits students likely to attend, such as early admission applicants or full scholarship recipients. Analysis reveals that yield rate is a meaningful characteristic that differentiates how many nontraditional presidents there were in 2014. Table 36 shows the distribution of nontraditional presidents by yield rate.

**Table 36. 2014 Distribution of Nontraditional Presidents by Yield Rate**

Yield Quartile 2012–2013 Acceptance Rate	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)
1 <sup>st</sup> quartile— best yield (above 35%); n=55	39	16	70.9	29.1
2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile (from 28 to 35%); n=56	42	14	75	25
3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile (from 22 to 27%); n=63	42	21	66.7	33.3
4 <sup>th</sup> quartile— worst yield (from 9 to 21%); n=59	30	29	50.9	49.1
<b>Total (n=233)</b>	153	80	65.7	34.3

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Note: Exact quartile boundaries selected to simplify separation.

Colleges in the bottom two yield quartiles are 51.6% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the best two yield quartiles. Colleges in the bottom quartile struggling with low yield are led by nontraditional presidents 49% of the time, and are 82% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the best two yield quartiles.

A plausible explanation for low-yield colleges' higher propensity to seek out a nontraditional president versus higher-yield institutions is that they are potentially more willing to try something new. However, this research cannot conclude causality.

Nonetheless, it is clear that in 2014, lower-yielding liberal arts colleges, on average, were more likely to have a nontraditional president than higher-yielding liberal arts colleges.



*Liberal Arts Colleges That Are Weaker Financially Are More Likely to Have a Nontraditional President*

There are several ways to consider whether a liberal arts college has financial strength. A lack of financial strength is likely to mean that the institution is under financial strain and thus potentially faces the kind of crisis or change situation that the search executives have seen as creating a greater probability of having a nontraditional president. That being said, it is clear that other types of nonfinancial crises could exist; thus, these metrics are only a partial indication of the phenomenon search executives have seen. These metrics also do not measure other sources of financial strain—such as debt, debt covenants, or unfunded pensions and deferred maintenance—or sources of strength such as urban real estate or other valuable items that may appear on the balance sheet at book value.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will cover three types of financial strength that could result in a different propensity to have a nontraditional president: endowment assets per student, size of total endowment, and the percentage of full-paying students. Analysis indicates a negative relationship between wealth and the presence of a nontraditional president, with lower wealth increasing the likelihood and the richest schools being the least likely.

The financial metric of endowment per student has the merit of providing a sense of the wealth of an institution given its size. It provides a sense of how much resource is available per student. The analysis shows that the poorer half of colleges (Tiers 1 and 2) is clearly more likely to have a nontraditional president than the richer half of colleges. Table 37 outlines the distribution.

**Table 37. 2014 Nontraditional Presidents by Endowment Assets Year-End 2013 per FTE Enrollment**

2012–2013 Endowment Assets year- end per FTE Enrollment (\$ K); n=234	2014 Number of Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 Number of Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 Percentage Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 Percentage of Nontraditional Presidents (%)
Tier 1: Smallest (0.044 to 26.3); n=58	34	24	58.6	41.4
Tier 2 (27.7 to 60.1); n=58	33	25	56.9	43.1
Tier 3 (60.2 to 133.9); n=59	44	15	74.6	25.4
Tier 4: Biggest (135.5 to 2,505.4); n=59	46	13	78	22

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

The poorest two tiers of colleges, as measured by endowment per student in 2014, were 78% more likely to have a nontraditional president than the two richest tiers. The explanation for this could be that richer schools have more latitude to continue the traditional path, not feeling pressed to take the perceived risk of turning to a nontraditional president. Another explanation that supports the observations of search executives is that a crisis (or, at least, a financial crisis) is less likely in a school with a very high endowment per student. As an illustration, the highest endowment per student is more than \$2.5 million per student at Soka University (a college that opened its US campus in 2001), indicating it has substantial flexibility to pursue whatever president it

needs without undue concern about finances. The differences between tier 1 and 2, and between tier 3 and 4 are not meaningful.

*The Richest 25 Percent of Colleges by Endowment Have One-Third the Likelihood of Having a Nontraditional President*

Another financial metric to indicate overall financial muscle is the size of the total endowment. Although it does not represent the financial resources that can be brought to bear on a per-student basis, it does provide a sense of the absolute scale of wealth a liberal arts college has to draw upon. As seen earlier, there are huge variations in the size of the endowment, and it is possible these differences resulted in a differentiated likelihood to have a nontraditional president in 2014. Analysis indicates that large endowments change the likelihood of having a nontraditional president, particularly among the top quartile of colleges. Table 38 provides the distribution of nontraditional presidents by endowment quartile.

**Table 38. 2014 Nontraditional Presidents by Endowment Assets Year-End 2013**

2012-2013 Endowment Assets year-end (\$ K); n=234	2014 Number of Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 Number of Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 Percentage Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 Percentage of Nontraditional Presidents (%)
Tier 1: Smallest (34 to 35,255); n=58	34	24	58.6	41.4
Tier 2 (35,526 to 98,752); n=58	35	23	60.3	39.7
Tier 3 (100,368 to 240,710); n=59	37	22	62.7	37.3
Tier 4 Biggest (241,584 to 2,025,996); n=59	51	8	86.4	13.6

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Of greatest note is that the likelihood of having a nontraditional president is almost three times higher in the 75% of colleges with smaller endowments than in the richest 25% of colleges. Another way of saying this is that the 25% of liberal arts colleges that represent the biggest endowments have a far smaller proportion of nontraditional presidents. The explanation for this is much the same as for schools with high endowments per students, but the analysis shows that there appears to be a much sharper breakpoint whereby an absolute level of endowment—say, somewhere above \$240 million—draws colleges to pursue the traditional model. A plausible explanation is that the sheer absolute size of wealth creates a safety net and reduces the likelihood of a true economic crisis that subsequently reduces the appetite of these colleges to pursue the perceived risk of selecting a nontraditional president.

*Colleges with a High Number of Full-Paying Students Are Less Likely to Have a Nontraditional President*

The number of full-paying students is a final metric to consider whether the propensity to hire a nontraditional president is linked to financial wealth. Although it is a lesser indicator of total wealth than endowment, full-paying students are clearly a desirable element from a financial point of view. As seen in the earlier case studies, a shift of just a few percentage points of full-paying students to aid grant students, such as was the case at Vassar and Wheaton, can substantially reduce financial health. Conversely, those that are able to attract a substantial percentage of full-paying students at high list-price tuition rates have substantial revenue streams. The analysis shows that colleges with the highest percentage of full-pays—in other words, those with greater

revenue streams per student—are less likely to hire a nontraditional president. Table 39 shows the distribution of nontraditional presidents by full-paying students.

**Table 39. 2014 Traditional and Nontraditional President Breakdown by First-Year, Full-Time, Full-Pay**

2012–2013 First Year Full- Time, Full Pay (%); n=241	2014 Number of Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 Number of Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 Percentage Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 Percentage of Nontraditional Presidents (%)
Quartile 1: Lowest (0 to <1); n=60	38	22	63.3	36.7
Quartile 2 (1 to <6); n=60	37	23	61.7	38.3
Quartile 3 (6 to <35); n=60	40	20	66.7	33.3
Quartile 4 (35 to 100); n=61	46	15	75.4	24.6

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

As a differentiating variable, full-paying students is less revealing as a discriminator of nontraditional presidents than endowment. Nevertheless, colleges in the highest-paying quartile four that are able to attract between 35 and 100% full-paying students have 14 percentage points fewer nontraditional presidents than colleges in the lowest two quartiles of full-paying students.

*Ranking: Nontraditional Presidents Are More Likely to Be Found as Ranking Declines*

Ranking is an example of a hybrid variable. *U.S. News & World Report* includes endowment, graduation rate, and selectivity in the algorithm to determine ranking. Given the great attention that rankings attract, and the sense of self-worth institutions seem to attach to the ranking, it would not be surprising if rankings influence the type of president they select. The highest ranked institutions are often characterized with words such as “elite” or “little Ivys” or “medallion” colleges.

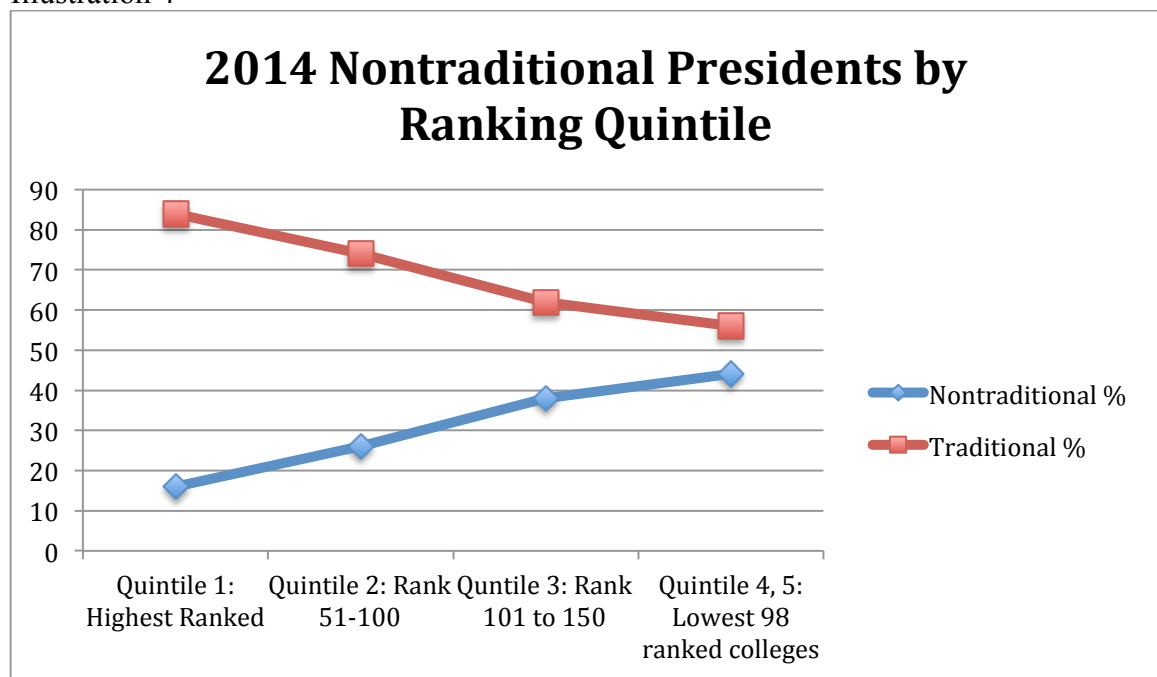
Search firm executives identified ranking as a characteristic that helps to define what type of liberal arts college hires a nontraditional president. Some thought higher-ranked institutions would be more likely, others were not sure, and others thought institutions in the middle would be less likely. Analysis outlined in Table 40 and Illustration 4 clearly demonstrates that a lower ranking has an almost linear relationship with increased likelihood of having a nontraditional president.

**Table 40. Ranking: 2014 Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts College Presidents by Quintile**

Rank 2014 USNWR Compass	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)
Top 50-highest ranked (n=50)	42	8	84	16
51-100 (n=50)	37	13	74	26
101-150 (n=50)	31	19	62	38
Bottom two quintiles (n=98)	55	43	56	44
Total (n=248)	165	83	66.5	33.5

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Illustration 4



Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

Higher-ranked liberal arts colleges in 2014 were clearly less likely to have a nontraditional president than lower-ranked peers. For instance, the bottom two quartiles of schools that represent those ranked over 150, or not ranked at all, are 2.75 times as likely to have a nontraditional president than a top-50 college. This confirms the experience of some search-firm executives but contradicts the experience of others who believe lower-ranked schools seek more traditional candidates. Given the analysis of selectivity, endowment, and graduation rates, and the fact that ranking is a hybrid variable that incorporates these three factors, the analysis is also broadly consistent with the findings on each of those variables.

Intuitively, this result makes sense. If a selection committee, or the search firm executives that work with them to help select college presidents, believes that a nontraditional president is a synonym for risk or crisis or transformation, then it should follow that nontraditional presidents are more likely to be found in situations of risk.

Ranking in many ways is a good, albeit not perfect, proxy for risk. Colleges that have big endowments, low acceptance rates, and high graduation rates are generally in good shape with low risk. By contrast, a college with little to no endowment, close to open admission, and lower graduation rates is likely to face greater risks and thus should be fertile territory for nontraditional presidents.

When considering a traditional president or a nontraditional president, which is actually the riskier choice? In a dynamic environment, as the liberal arts can be characterized given its context, sometimes the biggest risk a leading institution can take is not taking any risk at all. The answer, given the highly specific situations and cultures of each institution, is most likely “it depends.”

*Geography Matters: The Percentage of Nontraditional Presidents Is Three Times Higher in the South than the West*

The number of liberal arts colleges varies significantly by region, with the North having the most at 83 and the West the least with less than half the North. At one level, there is no reason to believe that the location of a college per se could influence the choice of a nontraditional or a traditional presidential candidate. However, it is possible that certain types of liberal arts colleges, such as more highly ranked or religiously affiliated, may have significantly varying concentrations by region, thereby creating meaningful variation. Analysis reveals that geography as defined by region is a meaningful characteristic that differentiates how many nontraditional presidents there were in 2014. Table 41 shows the distribution of nontraditional presidents by region.



**Table 41. 2014 Number and Percent of Nontraditional and Traditional Liberal Arts Presidents by Geographic Region**

Region	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (#)	2014 L.A. Traditional Presidents (%)	2014 L.A. Nontraditional Presidents (%)
Midwest (n=58)	40	18	69	31
North (n=83)	52	31	62.7	37.3
South (n=71)	42	29	59.2	40.8
West (n=36)	31	5	86.1	13.9
<b>Total (n=248)</b>	165	83	66.5	33.5

Source: Internet searches and analysis; IPEDS; USNWR Compass 2014 data

The variation in the likelihood to be a liberal arts nontraditional president by region is striking, with only 13.9% of presidents in the West being nontraditional but the other regions having 2.5 to 3 times the likelihood. Deeper analysis of the types of colleges in the West reveal that 19 of the 31 colleges are ranked among the top 75 liberal arts colleges, and as such are more selective and have greater resources.

On the other extreme, in the South 41% of liberal arts presidents are nontraditional, meaningfully above the average. However, in the South there is a higher concentration of lower-ranked institutions and a lower concentration of highly ranked colleges. Specifically, 45 of the 71 or 63% of institutions in the South are ranked in the bottom 103 colleges or 42% of institutions. Despite having more than double the number of liberal arts colleges than the West, only 10 institutions in the South are ranked in the top 75 compared to 19 in the West. Thus, the concentration of top 75 ranked liberal arts colleges is more than four times higher in the West than in the South, potentially influencing the number of nontraditional presidents. Further, 66% percent of liberal arts colleges in the South are religiously affiliated versus 39 percent in the West. Given the

previous analysis indicating ranking and religious affiliation as a salient characteristic influencing the selection of a nontraditional president, this is a plausible explanation.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Search Firm Executives' Views on Nontraditional President Search Trends**

Depending on the time scale selected, liberal arts presidency search trends take on a different hue. Given their resiliency as iconic institutions of higher education for centuries, many liberal arts colleges have enjoyed long-term stability that would make a normal business flush with envy. Until the 1980s, presidential searches almost all followed the traditional academic path, and executive search firms' involvement was rare. However, in the past 20 to 30 years, the changing landscape of higher education has forced tradition to consider evolution. One clear trend is that executive search firms are involved in the vast majority of liberal arts presidential searches. Sue May suggests that this may be because search committees "are recognizing that you're not going to find a great president in the want ads." Another clear trend is that there are more nontraditional presidents, no matter how they are defined, than during the 1980s.

A visit by alumni to their liberal arts campus can portray a sense of timelessness, the same beautiful trees and buildings augmented by a few new structures, and many of the same faculty members delivering a wonderful classroom experience. But just like a placid lake, a lot of movement and change is going on underneath the surface. Search firm executives are well placed to sense the changes afoot since they have to assess them while helping to write the presidential job description, and then reconcile a school's needs with the candidate pools. While each search executive's view is shaped by the reality of the searches they carry out, most have extensive experience and pattern recognition. Search firm executives note five major themes surrounding trends in liberal arts presidential searches during the past 10-plus years: (1) evolution to more exigent

requirements of the presidency; (2) increase in openness to nontraditional candidates; (3) changes to the selection process; (4) decrease in the attractiveness of the presidency; and (5) changes to the applicant pool mix.

### **1. Evolution to more exigent requirements of the presidency**

Perhaps the stability of liberal arts institutions for such a long period of time created the stereotypical image of an academic who presided over the faculty as the victory lap in a great career focused on the life of the mind. As Jackie Zavitch put it, “For a long-time . . . schools just needed a caretaker at the top.” There is consensus among search consultants that a liberal arts college presidency is becoming more exigent and that requirements are changing.

Search firm consultants see many of the dire financial trends already identified: expenses rising above costs, list-price tuitions rising well above inflation, unsustainable discount rates, endowments under pressure, stagnating or shrinking net revenues for many, and challenging demographics leading to flattening student demand. Jackie Zavitch bluntly summarizes the financial context facing presidents, declaring, “The financial model just doesn’t work. Escalating costs, the research burden, the cost of producing research that doesn’t make any money, is a hard job for schools. They bring in tuition, discount it a lot . . . the whole thing is spiraling upward in a really scary way.” The ability to manage these financial elements and business model changes are finding their ways into most searches.

Many search executives commented that the sheer complexity of the job has increased, pointing to Title IX regulations, compliance issues and lawsuits dealing with federal regulators, and increased needs to communicate with diverse stakeholders and to

make the case for the liberal arts. Some search firm executives pointed to marketing challenges and experience becoming more relevant for presidential searches. David Bellshaw shared that liberal arts college presidents are always “struggling with enrollment management every year. What’s my discount rate? Do I have the candidates? Do I have the class and diversity? Do I have the retention rates? I remember Mike Peters [president] at St. John’s in Santa Fe [saying], ‘I did not understand how much I have to focus on enrollment management.’”

Others say that the college president is increasingly analogous with someone running a business unit or corporation. Given that many enterprises have budgets and endowments in the tens and hundreds of millions of dollars, this is not a surprise. Anne Coyle explained, “Function areas have become more professionalized . . . requiring a president who is much more like a CEO of a company running a business, than a dean of faculty or the leader of academics. . . . You have to raise a lot of money . . . and figure out how to attract . . . more whole tuition paying students.” She continued, pointedly observing, “I think the old days, when the college president could just be an uber-academic and Mr. Chips figure are gone.”

## **2. The liberal arts presidency is decreasing in attractiveness**

There is no longitudinal data to quantify how attractive it has been through time to be a liberal arts college president. The noble purpose and mission of educating the next generation, a vibrant intellectual environment and life of the mind, the ability to leave in often beautiful surroundings, and the sheer prestige of a college presidency continue to make it a sought-after post. Yet several search executives commented that a major trend during the past 10 years affecting searches is the fundamental underlying decrease in the

attractiveness of the presidential position. It is possible that this decrease is directly related to the change in job profile just outlined, but this was not clear from the executive search consultants' remarks. Nevertheless, the search consultants have been in the business for sometimes 20-plus years and are in a unique position to comment.

One theme that has emerged is that the lifestyle of a president is increasingly difficult. Shelly Storbeck says that many candidates today—versus 10 years ago—opt out of the search overall after asking themselves, “Can you tolerate not being in your own bed 150 nights a year? Do you mind giving up all of your privacy? Do you mind [working] seven days a week?” Several commented that many qualified candidates see the lifestyles of friends who are presidents and don’t want that burden. However, it is unclear just how many feel that way or factually what the change in lifestyle translates into in hours worked. Anne Coyle characterized the position as “just a tough, tough job.”

Some presidents feel they live their life under a microscope. One female college president recently related her lack of privacy to Storbeck, saying, “I don’t know how you dress to go get the mail at the end of your driveway, but let me tell you how I dress. I put on my pumps and my pearls every time I go retrieve the mail out of the mailbox.”

Another perceived element of decreased job attractiveness is the reputational risk presidents take leading these complex institutions in a 24/7 media world. David Bellshaw explained, “Presidencies are becoming more and more detrimental to one’s reputation given the advent of the Internet, the blogs, the democratization of knowledge and communication. . . . [I]f you get caught in a downdraft . . . and have the faculty go rogue on you, it is amazing how they can undermine you in a heartbeat.”

Some search executives feel this trend could benefit nontraditional candidates. Coyle pointed out that recently the traditional president of one of the elite liberal arts colleges “didn’t last long because of these nonprofit organizations that are raising awareness of other compliance issues such as Title IX and other nonacademic regulations. This leader couldn’t stand the heat and had to get out.” She added that in these situations, “a tough, tough nontraditional manager such as Clayton Spencer [of Bates College] rather than a pure academic could make more sense.’

Perhaps the final contributing factor to decreased attractiveness could just be the higher volatility and lower tenure of college presidencies. In the same way that the tenure of CEOs in the corporate world has declined during the past two decades, it appears that the same phenomenon has found its way to academe. As Sue May summarized it, “There’s more turnover and presidencies are shorter.”

### **3. Liberal arts presidential candidate pools are changing, but exactly how and by how much is the subject of debate**

It is a carefully guarded secret how many and what type of candidates apply in liberal arts presidency searches. Data specifying the breakdown between traditional and nontraditional presidents, and how many are considered at each stage of a search—from the first filter often made by the search consultants, to the first round of eight to 12 interviewed, to the final campus interviews of two to four candidates—is simply not available. Some comment that the traditional pipeline is adversely affected by the decrease in attractiveness of the presidency, and the increased stress on the financial model is increasing the number of nontraditional candidates. Others see major shifts in

candidate mix emerging or the way candidates are discussed. However, there is no consensus on exactly what is happening.

As to the quality of the overall applicant pipeline, none of the search executives argued that it is trending toward improvement. May expressed the sentiment of many when she said, “It’s hard to find good candidates and there just isn’t a great pipeline.” Opinions are more nuanced on the health of the traditional and nontraditional candidate pools.

There is no debate that the number of traditional presidents has declined and the number of nontraditional presidents has increased during the past 30 years. What is less clear is how this has trended during the past 10 years in the liberal arts context.

Regarding the number of traditional candidates, the conventional wisdom is that the number has declined in recent years. The ACE (2013) *On the Pathway to the Presidency* study explained that the number of traditional provost candidates is declining because of a decreasing desire for the job, and the provost population is aging. Search executives are split on how they have experienced the trend during the past decade.

Some search executives indeed see that the traditional population of candidates, such as provosts, is in decline. In looking at trends in the total pool of candidates Ken Kring postulated, “The talent pool of traditional candidates is really not sufficient on a macro level to get the job done.” Commenting on the sustainability of the traditional candidate pools, he likened the situation to “reverse musical chairs. Every time the music stops there aren’t enough [candidates] to sit in the seats.” Coyle agreed with this sentiment, observing, “The traditional candidate pool is . . . in decline.”



However, not all search executives are seeing a decline in traditional candidates. When asked if he agreed with the decline in provost candidates reported in the press, John Isaacson said, “No. I see those articles . . . and I think it is nonsense.” He argued that provosts can be divided into two major segments: “those that want to be provosts, and those that want to be presidents. Most provosts either fail and give it up within three to four years or they get promoted . . . so that’s a very active crowd.”

During the past 10 years there is no consensus as to whether the number of nontraditional candidates in liberal arts searches is actually increasing. Coyle contends, ““We are seeing more candidates that are nontraditionals.” Storbeck concurred, saying, “The number of nontraditionals continues to go up.” However, others have not seen the same trend. Ellen Landers believes the mix has remained steady, observing, “The number of nontraditional candidates over the past ten years . . . seems to always be around the same amount.” It is possible that both sides could be right at the same time given the reality they are each experiencing in their searches. None of the search executives interviewed suggested that the number of nontraditional candidates is declining.

#### **4. The rise of the university dean?**

Others see it less in terms of purely traditional and nontraditional candidates and more in terms of pools of applicants or the ways they are discussed. One pool of applicants that appears to be getting more attention is the university dean, an increasingly relevant training ground that in many ways mirrors the size of responsibility at a liberal arts college. Isaacson believes that “the single biggest trend [in candidate pipeline] is that the American university world has moved slowly but inexorably toward revenue-centered

management in which deans are responsible for the revenue side as well as the expense side of their budgets. . . . Deans are now involved in fund-raising in rather large ways and are attentive to the product mix and how they pull in revenue . . . and highly attentive to enrollment patterns. So a dean in front of a search committee today is a completely different animal. A dean used to be far less attractive . . . [but] the real talent pool [today] . . . is the deans.” David Bellshaw commented that there are a greater number of nontraditional candidates coming from the government, military, or public sector, while Kring has seen “an increase in candidates from senior-level staff positions in student and campus life, enrollment management, and development.”

Beyond the mix of candidates, it appears that there have been changes in the way candidates are discussed in selection committees. Rather than framing candidates around being traditional or nontraditional, some see the debate shifting toward the skills that are needed. Kring has experienced that the result of the increasing financial strain on the system is a “consistent shift in the dialogue around competency-based selection as opposed to pedigree-based selection.”

## **5. Increase in openness to nontraditional candidates**

Not so long ago there was little appetite to consider the nontraditional candidate. Thinking back to the 1980s and 1990s, Isaacson reminisced, “People didn’t look to nontraditionals very often, and when it did happen it was sort of an accident, like David McLaughlin at Dartmouth. He was on the board; they were having trouble in the search, he jumped into it. . . . David was a disaster and left early. But those were rare cases. It didn’t happen very often.” Whether or not definitions of nontraditional presidents have

been changing, and independent of the definition selected, there has since clearly been a shift to consider nontraditional candidates.

Unlike two-plus decades ago, search firm executive interviews confirmed that all but a few of the most elite liberal arts colleges appear willing to consider a nontraditional candidate and that they receive interest from nontraditional candidates. Landers characterized the shift, saying that openness to nontraditional candidates during the past 20 years has increased “dramatically.” Perhaps the increased openness to different nontraditional profiles is less due to a desire for nontraditional candidates per se and more likely “because the pipeline is pretty slim,” observed May.

Notes Coyle, “I’d be hard pressed to think of a presidential search in recent memory where they didn’t express an openness to . . . interview at least one or two nontraditional candidates [but] . . . it doesn’t always get translated into them hiring the nontraditional.” Several search executives shared this view. As Isaacson lamented, “Nowadays every search is interested in nontraditional candidates. Trustees raise the topic. Faculty resists the topic. But they look at them. Nontraditionals tend to do rather badly in the interviews. When they’re asked questions that are involved in the operations of the place, they mumble.” He went on to say that the nontraditionals who do well often have government or public service experience where communication to complex stakeholder groups is required.

Some speculate that the context is increasingly favorable for nontraditional candidates. Zavitch argues, “The folks [traditional candidates] that are coming up contemporaneously through the pipeline of presidential candidates, are they really poised

to take on such a complex [financial] problem? Do they even want to? You would think it's an opportunity of timing for nontraditional candidates."

#### **6. Change in process: increased confidentiality and selection committee authority**

Another trend affecting liberal arts presidential searches involves the process itself. Whereas a few decades ago, the process was rather insular and there was no Internet, today presidential candidates and search committees face great scrutiny. Transparency and input is expected from multiple stakeholders—alumni, faculty, students, parents, and administration. For Boards of Trustees that are ultimately responsible for selecting most presidents and the selection committees that run the process, this has meant change and that their role has increased in importance.

To ensure that the best candidates are willing to consider a search, selection committees now need to wrestle with how to maintain the confidentiality of the best candidates. Smartphones, blogs, and 24/7 media make this challenge more complex. May explained, "The biggest trend has been the flipping around of confidentiality." It "used to be the search with a black box and then you draw back the curtain and three finalists parade in front of the whole community. In the liberal arts realm in particular they're not obligated to be public in the way that public institutions are, and they've begun to understand that the best candidates are the ones with the most to lose. With student newspapers that have Google alerts with the names of every key administrator, if [a president] steps foot on another campus [they're] doomed." It is unclear if this trend will favor traditional or nontraditional candidates, but in many institutions increased confidentiality results in more decision-making authority being conveyed to the selection committee. Thus, selection committee composition and their biases and

preferences become a vital decision-making fulcrum that is increasingly influencing who gets selected.

## Chapter 7

### **Advice for Nontraditional Candidates to Increase Their Odds of Selection, Fit, and a Good Transition**

For nontraditional candidates wondering how on earth they will ever be able to successfully transition to a college presidency, it is some consolation that there are now numerous examples to consider. Nevertheless, a presidential search process can be a daunting task to the unfamiliar candidate standing on the outside of the higher education labyrinth looking in. The good news is that search firm executives, and presidents who have made the transition, are well placed to comment on what works and doesn't work.

#### **1. Search executives' experience: how a nontraditional candidate can increase his or her chance of selection**

When search firm executives were probed about what factors help nontraditional candidates increase their chances of fit and selection, five themes emerged: (1) showing familiarity with and interest in the institution and higher education; (2) understanding of and ability to impact the financial model; (3) enhancing credentials and being prepared; (4) being an energetic and strong all-around communicator who can make the case for the liberal arts; and (5) establishing credibility with the faculty. Each of these themes is explored in turn.

#### *Showing Familiarity with and Interest in the Institution and Higher Education*

It would be unthinkable for an executive wanting to become a CEO in the pharmaceutical or banking industry not to understand the industry and its trends. Higher education is no exception. Superior nontraditional candidates develop a more than superficial understanding of the common national education themes present in the

*Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Inside Higher Ed* and are able to provide insight and examples on issues such as affordability, accessibility, graduation rates and degree completion, technology trends, and Title IX regulations, to name but a few. As Coyle summarized, “Successful nontraditional leaders [are] not people who move directly from the business world to higher education with no runway in between. . . . If you take some guy from Goldman Sachs and just stick him in a leadership position in higher ed, it’s not going to work.”

Vocabulary matters. Every industry and profession has its own vernacular and vocabulary. Many nontraditional candidates come from the business world. The anchoring bias of faculty is often that the candidates do not understand their world. When a nontraditional candidate makes a faux pas by importing jargon or acronyms from the business world into the conversation such as B2C customer acquisition, CRM, or balance sheet assets instead of student admissions, retention, or development and endowment, it simply reinforces the bias that already exists. Ellen Landers warned, “Sometimes we see business people step into these interviews and they’re speaking a completely foreign language: wrong terms that aren’t typically used in education . . . there’s just a disconnect in the discussions.”

Successful nontraditional candidates are able to relate their stories and experiences partly through the use of appropriate vocabulary, partly through the judicious use of appropriate analogies. It is an error for nontraditional candidates to assume that faculty and selection committee members actually understand where they come from or what they actually do. In developing a curriculum vitae, for example, candidates could organize and communicate their experience partially around themes of interest to search

committees such as fund-raising (sales experience), publications and research (company thought leadership and speeches), faculty experience (leadership development in the corporation or adjunct faculty experience), shared governance experience (such as in a law firm, accounting firm, family-owned business, nonprofit, or consultancy), or complex stakeholder management.

Several search executives point out that nontraditional candidates need to invest in understanding the specificities of the institution in which they are expressing interest. It may seem like an obvious point to be prepared, but selection committees expect to see candidates illustrate their understanding of their institution's specific situation (e.g., size, programs, strengths, challenges, traditions) instead of generalities that could be true anywhere. Search executives mentioned that nontraditional candidates who have spoken with students or people from the university and have visited campus have an advantage. Selection committees further expect the candidate to be able to articulate why he or she is interested specifically in that school, how they got interested and convinced that this is a good fit, and how they see the major opportunities and threats; these questions often are part of the first so-called "airport interviews."

Search firm executives suggested a potpourri of other practical ideas for nontraditional candidates to increase their understanding of higher education. One suggestion is to build a network with other leaders in higher education and to engage in regular dialogue with those working in the environment. For those candidates earlier in the process, some recommend obtaining a nomination written by a respected academic. A final suggested mechanism to increase credibility is to get familiar with the latest



developments in technology-enabled learning by taking a class in a MOOC (massive open online course) and being able to comment on trends and new pedagogical tools.

*Demonstrating Understanding of and Willingness to Address the Financial Model Is Key*

The fiduciary responsibility every president has for the financial well-being of the liberal arts college combined with the challenging financial context facing liberal arts colleges means that a nontraditional candidate needs to be able to demonstrate clearly that he or she knows what this entails and can bring something to the table. According to search executives, nontraditional candidates are usually assumed to be strong on this dimension. Landers explained that, in her experience, “search committees view the reason to go to an external nontraditional candidate is because they will be better in fund-raising.”

Search executives underlined the external nature of the presidency today and the need to be on the road fund-raising as many as 150 nights per year. Even at the colleges with the highest endowments, the pressures on a college president for fund-raising are substantial and unrelenting. Nontraditional candidates who have sales experience, or experience in building trust-based relationships and external networks, or fund-raising in a nonprofit setting can burnish their credentials by demonstrating both a passion and energy for fund-raising, but also by communicating an understanding of the importance of eleemosynary processes as well as their own acumen.

In many ways a liberal arts college president is de facto like the CEO of a business. He or she needs to find a way to grow revenue and stay on budget. However, in liberal arts institutions the revenue streams are narrow and come almost entirely from tuition and giving. Although search executives counseled against getting too prescriptive

about revenue generation ideas in cover letters, they did highlight that nontraditional candidates are more successful if they demonstrate an understanding of key revenue levers, particularly in interviews. Landers commented that the challenging financial context facing most liberal arts colleges means “that a president needs to understand the complexity of the [financial] levers he or she has. . . . I think that financially oriented skill sets are important and that’s not necessarily the skill set of someone who’s come up the traditional faculty route.”

*Building Relevant Credentials and Being Prepared Are Essential*

Although the number of nontraditional presidents has risen to one-third, the number of nontraditional presidents who just parachute into a liberal arts presidency from the nonacademic world without a doctorate is very small indeed. Search firm executives find that successful nontraditional candidates find a way to build connections to higher education. This can take many forms, but nontraditional candidates need to be able to tell a story about how they fit, and building the relevant credentials to be prepared takes time. As Landers wryly characterized the situation, “Preparedness doesn’t just happen in a couple of days before the interview. What have they done in their career that indicates they have an interest and this isn’t just a way of leaving a corporate job?”

One common credential that search firm executives outline is the need for a terminal degree—in particular, a doctorate. The research has shown that 94% of current liberal arts presidents have some type of doctorate, whether it is a JD, MD, EdD, or—even better—a PhD supporting their experience. Lawrence Schall, president of Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, went back to school in his forties to get his doctorate in higher education at the University of Pennsylvania. Bowdoin’s recently announced

nontraditional president, Clayton Rose, went back to obtain his doctorate in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania after a highly successful career of 20-plus years on Wall Street in finance. May bluntly said that in her experience, “If you don’t have a doctorate, if you haven’t worked within academia, faculty are in general highly resistant to the idea of a nontraditional.”

Several search executives mentioned that nontraditional candidates who have university board-level experience are able to parlay it into enhanced credibility. Beyond being a board member, search executives pointed to classroom experience as an adjunct professor, lecturer, or faculty member in corporate learning environments as another way nontraditional candidates can improve their case. This makes sense, as the ultimate mission of higher education is to educate students. As Storbeck advised, “I always tell nontraditional candidates to get in the classroom; it’s an absolute baseline activity . . . to show that you’re interested in this space.”

Some of the preparation required is thus long-term, but some is short-term and involves things like writing an excellent CV, a thoughtful cover letter, doing background research on the institution, and connecting with stakeholders via networking. Storbeck confirmed that it is a big effort, stating that a nontraditional “needs to do twice as much homework as somebody who’s living inside that environment traditionally.” Zavitch emphasized a similar aspect, saying that “the best candidates I’ve seen in the nontraditional realm are those that can challenge schools [by saying] . . . have you thought about XYZ? Here’s two things I see coming, and these are ways you might address it, understanding you have all these constraints. So you have to be smarter than the institution. That’s a pretty high bar.”

### *Being a Great All-Around Communicator*

Although it could be said that being a great communicator could equally apply to traditional candidates, the ability to communicate well in the liberal arts context is a particular challenge for nontraditional candidates. Search firm executives highlighted that there is often a bias among selection committee members, and faculty in particular, that nontraditional candidates will be top-down, directive, authoritarian leaders who issue edicts. Any indications that this may be the case are amplified as they confirm a bias that may be already present.

One mechanism successful nontraditional candidates use is to show that they have listening skills and can connect to different stakeholder groups, and students in particular. Landers commented that a common slip-up for a nontraditional candidate is to “show a lack of passion for or understanding of students or the mission (or) to do an interview and never mention the students.” As interview processes move to final stages, on-campus interviews allow greater scope for candidates to ask questions. Not only do they need to be able to ask intelligent, open-ended questions, they need to be able to show that they actually listen to the responses.

There is agreement among all search executives that the position of college president is an exceptionally difficult role and getting even more so over time. The corollary to this challenge is that search committees carefully assess whether the candidate has the energy to be up to the 24/7/365 nature of the task. Not only does the nontraditional candidate need to be able to convince the committee and associated stakeholders that they have the bona fide credentials; he or she needs to demonstrate that they can inspire.

Commenting on what often trips up nontraditional candidates, Isaacson related that nontraditional candidates often mistake selection committees as looking for managerial competence and mastery of metrics when, in fact, “what goes on in these places is first and foremost inspiration.” Kring took a slightly different tack, saying that an important behavioral component for successful nontraditional candidates “is just energy, and more specifically emotional energy. By that I mean the willingness and temperament to be criticized, to be ignored, to be resisted in ways that are not familiar in nonacademic settings.”

Nontraditional candidates have a few opportunities to demonstrate that they have the ability to inspire in the process, and they need to make the best of them. On-campus interviews generally afford candidates eight to 15-minute opening speech slots for candidates to address the faculty, and/or students, and/or the administration in plenary. Nontraditional candidates need to be prepared and well rehearsed much more than the typical traditional candidate, who would have pattern recognition and already have seen this type of process before.

In certain circumstances nontraditional candidates can turn this to their advantage. Isaacson gave one example close to the liberal arts of a nontraditional president bridging the gap. He said, “Jim Kim showed up in front of the Dartmouth search committee with the most inspiring speech I’ve heard. . . . He attached Dartmouth’s future to the highest possible moral callings and then linked his speech to the sayings and doings of historic Dartmouth presidents. He said we are going to educate the leaders of the world and they must be prepared to do the world’s hardest work, and then he launched into what the

world's work was and how you inspire students to aspire to that work. Just took them by storm.”

Given the high price of many liberal arts colleges, and the increased scrutiny students and parents then put into the return on that investment, another characteristic search executives cited is the ability to make the case for the liberal arts. Presidents are expected to be external ambassadors. David Bellshaw related that what he has experienced is “an increasing desire to find a president . . . who can be a spokesperson and defender of the liberal arts that takes the bully pulpit back.” For a nontraditional president, this is not an easy task, but it can take many forms. Some suggested that a very well-written three-page cover letter could convey the case for the liberal arts and its mission. Others suggested that it needs to be part of the story told by the candidate.

*Establishing Credibility with the Faculty: The Nontraditional President's Bête Noir*

Search firm executives suggest that perhaps the most difficult, and important, challenge for a nontraditional candidate is to establish credibility with the faculty. Being open to consider a token nontraditional candidate as one of eight on a slate to interview is one thing; getting the faculty comfortable enough to be willing to accept a nontraditional candidate as the president is quite another. When asked to characterize obstacles facing nontraditional candidates, Coyle responded, “Acceptance by the faculty would be number 1. The faculty typically want to be led by one of their own. Faculty members on a search committee will go straight to a candidate's publications record because they're in this mindset.”

According to search executives, acknowledging and honoring shared governance is a sine qua non for all nontraditional candidates. Traditional candidates' understanding

of shared governance is assumed. Coming from the corporate world, it might be easy for a nontraditional candidate to assume that the Board of Trustees has all of the decision-making power in a liberal arts college. Although the board absolutely has an important role to play, and are the formal decision makers in the choice of the president, nontraditional candidates should remember that the faculty play a major role in decision-making processes and often comprise up to half of the selection committee membership. Nontraditional candidates coming from corporate America are often viewed with suspicion, whereas lawyers or consultants who work in a partnership model familiar with a variant of shared governance may find convincing faculty easier. Faculty and administration in higher education are generally allergic to being told what to do and will shun nontraditional candidates who illustrate contempt for the consensus-oriented, consultative decision-making process found in colleges.

One mechanism nontraditional candidates can use to convey understanding of shared governance is explicitly to acknowledge it and explain how they would go about solving problems. For instance, a typical banana peel could be a question such as, “What is your vision for the college?” Bellshaw illustrated this struggle, saying, “It’s amazing how poorly candidates do in terms of expressing a vision that is meaningful and equal doses of “I’m coming in, I’m going to learn from you, I’m going to join you, and I’m going to have a notion of what the promised land looks like,” and being able to express that “in academic terms and not . . . business jargon.”

Some search executives likened the president’s task of managing shared governance to more of a political process where a president is constantly running for office. Commenting on shared governance, Isaacson said, “It’s better to think of a

broader set of constituents: alumni, board members, parents, prospective students, current students, . . . faculty, the community, . . . staff.” He likened the challenge as analogous to that of being a mayor of “a nice complicated midsize city . . . with not a single homogeneous suburb that has a lot of different people, a decaying infrastructure, and bad economics.”

It is entirely understandable that faculty are sensitive to a president comprehending their plight, since a president, once elected, is in a position to influence who gets tenure, the ultimate currency of the realm among higher education faculty. According to search executives, one mechanism successful nontraditional candidates use to bridge toward faculty is to demonstrate self-awareness of being a nontraditional. Reflecting on how nontraditional candidates could do this, Coyle recommended that they “acknowledge the [hurdle] in the process, figure out how [they’re] going to overcome it, to explicitly talk about it, . . . and acknowledging that the first year will really be spent listening and getting to know people.”

The need to establish credibility with faculty during the selection process is only the beginning of the process for a nontraditional president. Tenured faculty members see many presidents come and go, and scrutinize what a president actually does. One search executive commented that a nontraditional president was very well received when he interviewed every one of the tenured faculty members one-on-one and read their research before meeting with them in the first year.

Nontraditional presidents who don’t make the investment to connect with faculty do so at their own peril. Storbeck related her experience, saying, “Every [nontraditional] falls and skins their knee . . . in the first year, and usually in a major way. Some horrible



thing happens that they didn't anticipate and they don't know how to deal with [it]. . . .

The difference with someone who . . . skins their knee from the academy is that somebody's going to pick you up and brush you off and get started again. When you're a nontraditional they're going to sit back, fold their arms, and they're going to say, 'See, I told you he shouldn't have been in this job.' It's very unforgiving for somebody who's not a member of the Guild."

## **2. Presidents' backgrounds, and reflections and lessons learned on excelling in the selection process**

For those aspiring nontraditional presidents on the outside looking in, decoding how to navigate the process and find the right opportunity or "fit" can be a daunting task. As the search executives pointed out, nontraditional candidates often have to work twice as hard to be prepared and to overcome skepticism from numerous corners. Yet some have figured out a way to convince the jury and make the transition to a liberal arts presidency. To understand the experiences and lessons learned from the trenches, I interviewed these presidents and asked them to share their insights and wisdom.

### *Presidents' Backgrounds*

As previously mentioned, one of the presidents I interviewed was William Bowen, formerly the president of Princeton University. Although Princeton is not a stand-alone liberal arts college as defined by *U.S. News & World Report*, primarily because it is larger and has several graduate schools, it is clearly a university where the liberal arts has been a central part of its genetic code for centuries. Bowen is also a traditional president, but was selected for inclusion in the study not only because he has personally had to make the transition to president and has relevant ideas on the process

and how to think about fit, but also because he has been a mentor to and keen observer of numerous nontraditional presidents in the variety of influential roles he has played in higher education.

Three of the presidents I interviewed are nontraditional presidents: John Fry of Drexel University (and former president of Franklin & Marshall College), David Greene of Colby College, and Lawrence Schall of Oglethorpe University. They share the common attribute that they have not been on the tenured faculty track, the criteria to be considered a traditional candidate. They also share the common attribute that each was not a total stranger to higher education when they assumed their first presidency, all having passed through administrative leadership positions in higher education prior to becoming president. Just like no two liberal arts colleges are exactly alike, the same goes for the pathways of a nontraditional president.

John Fry is one of a small percentage of university presidents who does not have a doctorate. Having graduated with a liberal arts undergraduate degree in American civilization from Lafayette College, and an MBA from New York University, Fry pursued a successful career in management consulting at Coopers and Lybrand. He made his transition to higher education by joining Judith Rodin's new presidential team at the University of Pennsylvania as executive vice president of finance after having Penn as his client. After several years in that position he was recruited directly as president of Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 2002. He is presently the president of Drexel University, a position he has held since 2010.

David Greene is a classic example of what Birnbaum (2002) would categorize as a president who came from the steward archetype, meaning a series of leadership

positions in higher education outside the faculty track. Having studied the liberal arts at Hamilton College, Greene went on to complete master's and doctoral degrees at Harvard University in the fields of psychology and education. Upon graduation, he began a career in various higher education leadership and administration roles at a variety of institutions, including Hartnell College, Wells College, and subsequently Smith College and Brown University, where he led areas related to planning and the educational environment. Prior to his appointment at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, in summer 2014, Greene was executive vice president at the University of Chicago, where he oversaw a very large budget and several departments. Although he has never been on a tenure track, and is thus considered nontraditional, he has conducted research and taught courses.

Lawrence Schall started his career as a lawyer specializing in civil rights litigation after obtaining his JD from the University of Pennsylvania. After a dozen years as an attorney, he shifted his career to higher education, returning to his alma mater—Swarthmore College—where he was vice president for administration. While at Swarthmore, Schall decided he would like to become a university president and completed his doctorate in higher education management at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also became an adjunct faculty member. Soon after his doctorate was completed, Schall left Swarthmore to join Oglethorpe University in Atlanta as its 16<sup>th</sup> president.

Ironically, two of the nontraditional presidents feel the nontraditional label is a misnomer. Greene related that he was not sure how nontraditional he is given that he had “done research and writing and teaching, and been at the best universities in the world in senior leadership and academic administrative positions.” Schall argued, “Ten years ago

I was a nontraditional president. Today I'm not. . . . There are so many presidents who haven't done [the traditional provost route] that I think the use of traditional and nontraditional is probably not the right terminology."

Reflecting on how to navigate the selection process and prepare the pathway to a possible presidency, presidents had their own nuggets of wisdom. Some of the reflections were almost philosophical, others quite tactical, but all were focused on improving the likelihood of becoming a liberal arts college president. Four theme areas were identified: (1) close profile gaps; (2) meet the top search executives; (3) be realistic; and (4) get started and persevere.

#### *Lesson 1: Close Profile Gaps via Job Rotations, Mentorship, and Projects*

Each of the three nontraditional presidents augmented his understanding of higher education by working at a prestigious higher education institution. Not only did this enhance their vocabulary and understanding of how decisions are made, it also provided them with a firsthand basis to evaluate whether a presidential career might make sense for them. Echoing a theme of the search firm executives, preparation for a presidency is not something that is done overnight and requires thoughtful planning in terms of career responsibilities.

One practical step college president aspirants can pursue is to figure out what obvious gaps there may be in the profile and to start a several-year-process via job rotations to bolster their curriculum vitae, addressing weaker areas. Closing these gaps is essential partly because selection committees "don't ask you about things that you [have] a lot of experience in," Schall related. For instance, if a candidate has not been in the classroom, an option can be to teach as an adjunct professor. For a businessperson, a first

step via a higher education administrative role can substantially reframe a candidate's tool kit, cultural familiarity, and narrative in future searches.

Alternatively, as a consultant, Fry gained expertise about higher education by serving universities as clients. Schall thought his chances of and tool kit for becoming a president would be enhanced with a doctorate, and he enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania's Executive Doctorate in Higher Education Management program specifically designed for nontraditional higher education leaders working full-time. He added, "I think there were 18 in my cohort . . . a third of us are president now, maybe even more."

Each of the three nontraditional presidents benefited from the mentorship of college presidents for whom they worked. Like any profession, gaining apprenticeship via mentoring from someone already in the position is invaluable. Whether it was Robert Zimmer helping David Greene at the University of Chicago, Alfred Bloom guiding Lawrence Schall at Swarthmore, or Judith Rodin at the University of Pennsylvania taking John Fry under her wing, all of the nontraditional presidents sought and found mentors with the experience they needed. Fry, remembering his transition to the University of Pennsylvania from consulting at age 34, recounted, "I began this straight-up-in-the-air learning curve which took a long time, but I had the benefit of an amazing leader who helped me shape what I try to do today." The nontraditional presidents pursued their apprenticeship at outstanding institutions with unquestioned academic rigor. A clear lesson learned is that aspiring nontraditional presidents should carefully problem-solve from whom they will seek wisdom and mentorship about the presidency, actively seeking out their mentors.

Although structural career moves that fundamentally place a career trajectory onto a higher education pathway may be required or helpful, sometimes there are additional holes in a profile that can be addressed via projects or adjustments to job scope. For President Schall, he knew that search committees would scrutinize his experience as a fund-raiser and faculty member. He discusses his solution by saying, “I went about intentionally trying to fill those holes in a way that I could tell two stories in each area . . . [after all] the interview is only going to last so long. . . . So I asked my president, ‘Would you be willing to allow me to go with you on some of your fund-raising visits?’” The president agreed, and Schall successfully contributed to securing some large gifts. He also started to teach, both at Penn and Swarthmore. Instead of sheepishly admitting he had no experience the next time he was probed about his fund-raising experience, he reflected, “My answer wasn’t, ‘I don’t have any.’ I had a couple of stories and that was enough.”

### *Lesson 2: Build a Network with Search Firm Executives*

Rare is the college president search that proceeds today without the support of a search firm, a fact that does not leave candidates indifferent. As Schall put it, “They’re a necessary evil to some extent. But every presidential search uses a search firm. . . . On occasion they add value, and they’re very expensive. But it’s just part of the business.” Love them or hate them, they are professionals who play an important role in being kingmaker.

Some nontraditional presidents found that the top search firm executives play an indispensable mentoring role, making a real difference in their own search process experiences. Fry explained that in the Franklin and Marshall search, he often turned to

search executive Storbeck to better understand institutional context and how the search committee was thinking about fit. He commented, “Shelly’s really exceptional because she can give you those kind of insights . . . and is open for these kinds of conversations.”

The very nature of the search profession can sometimes make it transactional, given the number of candidates who apply for a given position and difficulty in providing one-on-one attention or feedback to each applicant, or the convincing that is needed to persuade a candidate to “toss a hat into the ring.” An intense search executive conversation one day with a seeming glimmer of hope may be followed by weeks or even months of radio silence until a new president designate appears, leaving aspirants to puzzle over what might have been. As I noted in these interviews, a search executive may have his or her own individual anchoring bias and opinions shaped by personal experiences. However, these interviews revealed that search firms have no particular incentive to help a nontraditional candidate per se.

Schall argued that search firm executives are not gatekeepers for or against a nontraditional president, and explained search firms’ modus operandi as simply, “They succeed when they are able to place a candidate. They don’t care where the person is from.” If properly handled, successful placements, or even candidates that satisfactorily advance but are not ultimately named president, may result in the blooming of a mutually beneficial long-term relationship between candidate and search executive, a self-correcting mechanism that puts in place an incentive for both candidate and search executive to treat each other professionally.

All three nontraditional presidents agreed that it is a worthwhile investment for any nontraditional candidate to get to know the search firms and their executives, if only

to be considered in the first place. A typical presidential search results in a flood of candidate options, and search firms not only use their own networks to elicit possible candidates, but also often conduct the first screen filter and positioning on who and what the search committee sees. Greene confirmed search firms' salience, saying that they "play a huge role. . . . The thing they do more than anything is to develop the pool. In the end they have some influence for sure on who gets into those smaller groups as you move down the road . . . but they'll have a very significant influence on who's in the pool in the first place."

The good news is that the number of search executive firms that place liberal arts presidents is fairly concentrated, reducing the workload for nontraditional candidates. Naming most of the search firms interviewed in this study, the nontraditional presidents urged aspirants to get to know each search committee's consiglieri. President Schall posited, "As a potential candidate, being well thought of and known by key people of the search firms is critical." Reflecting on what nontraditional candidates can do to increase their chances, Greene asserted, "There's only about four search firms out there that actually place the presidents at the top places, and if you knew the top four people in those firms and if those individuals thought you were a credible candidate . . . that is probably the single most important thing you can do."

### *Lesson 3: Apply for Presidential Positions at Colleges That Are Realistic*

My interviews identified that nontraditional candidates need to be realistic about where they apply and their chances to move forward. In some ways the behaviors and mindsets of a presidential selection committee are analogous to what happens in a college admission office. There are minimum standards and thresholds for academic



achievement for which rare exceptions are made. Candidates from certain schools carry greater credibility. At certain times the priority may be to have a candidate who fills a specific need. And although there are always exceptions to the rule, applicants need to be realistic about their chances. A student with a 500 English SAT is about as likely to get into Amherst as an executive is to gain a presidency straight from Wall Street.

Commenting on Swarthmore College's current presidential search, Schall—a Swarthmore graduate and their former executive vice president—asserted that even after 10 years as a liberal arts president, “If I wanted to throw my hat into the Swarthmore ring, they'd talk to me, I suppose, but I would never get that job.”

Nontraditional presidents suggested that the way to navigate the labyrinth is to think about colleges in segments. Not only do colleges have different needs and priorities, they have certain conventions and unspoken standards for how they pick their president. Similar to the experience of the search firm executives, the nontraditional presidents pointed out that there is a distinctive top tier of liberal arts colleges that act differently than others. President Greene termed the top 30 to 40 or so as “elite,” and President Schall characterized the top 10% as “rarified air” and added, “By and large the first tier is going to hire someone whose life has been spent inside the academy.”

The interviews suggested that nontraditional candidates should be thoughtful and realistic about where they apply, and that the best chance is likely to be at a college where there is some logical progression and theme related to where they are. As Schall emphasized, “It's very hard to switch segments . . . moving from tier 3 to tier 1 would be almost unheard of. Your first presidency is likely to be in the world you know.”

#### *Lesson 4: Get Started and “If You Don’t Succeed, Try, Try Again”*

The nontraditional presidents indicated that there is no silver bullet to landing the first presidency and that it often requires perseverance. For those who have never been through the presidential selection process, it is rather unlike anything found in the corporate world, and a reflection of the shared governance process. The processes often take six to nine months and involve countless interviews by and speeches in front of all varieties of stakeholders. Practice helped candidates refine storytelling, enhance preparation and self-awareness, and hone pattern recognition.

The nontraditional presidents related that it usually takes several bites at the apple to be successful. Schall shared that he participated in at least eight searches before getting his first two offers. Fry reflected that the only way to proceed is to “get in searches and start getting your hands dirty.” My interviews equally made it clear that the processes tested candidates’ fortitude. President Fry spoke to the frustration many nontraditional candidates encounter when he said, “I won’t regale you with my stories of failure, but they are numerous. I was at Penn and maybe 39 years old the first time I got a call from one of these places and I got right to the finals. I said to myself, ‘Hey, this is easy’ and then I didn’t get the job. And then I didn’t get the next six jobs. . . . I remember being very bitter and disappointed.”

### **3. Presidents’ five lenses for candidates to find the right fit**

Discussion of what it takes to become a nontraditional college president often focuses on the point of view of the search committee and what it takes for a candidate to get an offer. Interviews with the search firm executives clearly illustrated that there are a combination of objective and subjective measures that are considered. Perhaps one of the

most frustrating types of feedback a candidate can receive from a committee is that “the fit wasn’t right.” Search firm executives are also not ambivalent about the term *fit*. As Isaacson put it, “Fit is an excuse of not knowing how to talk. If people say it’s all about fit, what it means is they don’t know what they’re looking for, so they’re going to trust their unconscious intuition rather than their conscious intelligence. . . . That is irrational, unconscious bias—sometimes useful, sometimes nonsense.”

Given that many nontraditional candidates have successful careers in their own right, and are often highly qualified, a perhaps underestimated but equally important aspect to consider is how the nontraditional candidate should find the right presidency that is personally a good fit. After all, a candidate is not obligated to accept a presidential offer in the end if he or she is not comfortable. So how have nontraditional candidates thought about whether they like—and should ultimately accept—the presidencies they are considering and/or offered? Although it is possible other unspoken factors such as compensation or prestige may have played a role in considering attractiveness, open-ended interview questions revealed five filters nontraditional presidents found helpful to evaluate a presidency’s fit with their life: values, the problem to be solved, authenticity, intuition and chemistry, and family.

The first lens presidents used is to examine whether the mission and culture aligned to their personal values and motivations. For those who may think that a shift to a liberal arts college presidency may be a good way to downshift from corporate life to a memory lane with a better lifestyle, they will be sorely disappointed. There is no question that the job of liberal arts college president is an all-consuming task. Many who pursue a presidency are motivated by the idea of changing students’ lives and shaping the

next generation of leaders—giving back the gift that others gave them sometime earlier in their life. President Greene related that, for him, leading Colby and ensuring the liberal arts colleges retain an impactful role in society is “a calling.”

One aspect that was evident from interviewing the presidents is their unflagging belief in liberal arts education. Each had personally attended a liberal arts institution and had fond memories and firsthand experience as to how it had changed their life; certain of them had children who studied the liberal arts. Given the intensity of the job, and increasing skepticism about the value of a liberal arts education, it is important that aspiring presidents actually believe in the liberal arts and be motivated by its mission. It is hard to convince others if you are not convinced yourself. Fry characterized a liberal arts education as “a gift,” and Greene said he cares deeply about “transforming the lives of individuals . . . [and] democratizing a place like [Colby]” to offer the education to underprivileged students.

But behind this noble purpose lies the harsh reality that the culture and mission of a liberal arts college can vary significantly from one institution to another, and it may not be exactly what it appears from the website or warm memories from days past as a student. Some colleges have a religious bent or affiliation; some are agnostic. Some colleges are very liberal; others more conservative. Given the intensity of the job, understanding and ensuring that the culture and mission of the institution aligns to one’s personal values was a theme each president considered when examining a presidency. Commenting on how he considered fit at Colby, Greene declared, “It’s fundamental that the mission align with my values, that the culture be one that contributes in important

ways to the mission of the institution, that there be a desire to move forward. . . . Colby had that.”

One of the mechanisms presidents mentioned to ascertain the mission and values was explicitly to study and examine both in the process. For example, presidents mentioned that they asked questions about the values and culture, read materials on the website, and tried to surmise whether the people they met embodied those values. In so doing, they needed to reflect on their own personal values. Bowen asserted that it is important for a president to be “empathetic to the values, historical values, of these smallish places.” The starting point for this is for the president to understand what mission and values actually are and to see if they fit with the schools’ *raison d’être*.

A second lens presidents used to determine fit is to understand the problems to be solved. The starting point for each liberal arts college, and what they are seeking from the new president, can be strikingly different. One college may face a financial crisis with enrollment challenges and ballooning budget deficits; another may face a rebellious faculty or Title IX investigations; and yet others may have a disgruntled and/or disengaged board or need innovation to generate new revenue streams. Although it may be tempting to consider the presidential position descriptions on *Inside Higher Ed*’s or the search firms’ websites with an egalitarian mindset, the reality is that not all presidencies are created equal. The college presidents I interviewed underlined that it is important to understand the work that actually needs to get done.

Given that nontraditional candidates are generally—rightly or wrongly—perceived to be synonymous with change, it would make sense that candidates glean from a search what the pressing issues are. Distilling an accurate picture is never easy, as

colleges are constantly in the limelight for prospective students and alumni to see, and thus posturing and putting their best foot forward is rightfully standard practice.

Presidents (and a few search executives) suggested that a good place to start is by carefully reading the position description and trying to ascertain if the institution wants change or is happy with maintaining the status quo; or, as Fry and Storbeck put it, “polishing the stone.” The latter is generally infertile territory for a nontraditional cum change agent. President Fry shared that one of the items on his mental checklist for assessing fit is simply to ask, “What’s the problem? I just want to know what the problem is. . . . I thought Franklin & Marshall’s were: ‘How could this place that had so much momentum and so much resources be losing—why did it lose momentum and how can we think about restarting that?’”

A different twist suggested by the interviews is that beyond understanding the problem to be solved, it is important for a presidential aspirant to examine whether the problem is solvable. As Greene noted, the first way to accomplish this is “having some resources at an institution to actually do something. It’s one thing to want to be better; it’s another to have the means to do so.” A second mechanism is to determine if the task at hand fits with the candidate’s strengths.

Along these lines, Schall related that a probing of the resources required to achieve the ambition of the board led to an interesting conversation with the trustees. During the interview process, Schall challenged the board to walk the talk, saying, “‘It’s certainly not embarrassing but if you decide to hire me, it’s going to have to change because we can’t be successful with the level of support you’re providing.’ The board

retorted, ‘So you’re telling us if we hire you, it’s going to cost us money out of our pocket?’ And I said, ‘That’s exactly what I’m telling you.’”

A third lens the nontraditional presidents deployed to assess fit was to show authenticity and self-awareness about concerns. Every candidate, traditional and nontraditional alike, faces concerns about his or her candidacy; some of the concerns are probed, while some remain unspoken or are elliptically addressed or the subject of more subtle passive-aggressiveness on behalf of skeptics, given a desire for outward decorum in the processes. Selection committee members often have their anchoring bias. The stereotype bias that might exist would be for a board of trustees to look favorably upon a nontraditional candidate’s capacity for change and financial stewardship, and to understand and see parallels between a more business-oriented experience and the challenges at hand. Faculty might be skeptical of the nontraditional candidate’s ability to understand the tenure process, respect research requirements, and use academic shared governance processes (versus directive, top-down processes found in the business world), for example. My interviews revealed that nontraditional candidates found different ways to test for fit explicitly and address these oft-unspoken concerns and biases. Indeed, doing so was essential to their success.

One mechanism nontraditional candidates used to bridge concerns was to be willing to have the confidence to have an authentic conversation, instead of hiding behind platitudes. For Schall, this required having the confidence to challenge the status quo. At Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, he had heard throughout the process that Oglethorpe was “Atlanta’s best kept secret.” He forced the selection committee’s hand by asking, ““What’s the secret?” Unless we can be clear that there’s a market . . . we will continue

to flounder. . . . If you're looking for someone to come in and be a caretaker of what you've got, I'm just not the right person. . . . But if you're really looking for someone to ask really hard questions, to be truthful with you, the board, about what we're doing well and what we're not doing well, then we probably ought to keep talking."

Interviews further revealed that a different convention nontraditional candidates can use is to simply be themselves and to demonstrate self-awareness by naming the concern and putting it directly on the table. After numerous failed searches where he had been a finalist, and some soul-searching, Fry realized that the unspoken concern was that the faculty were uncomfortable with the fact that he did not have his doctorate and perceived that he had an inadequate appreciation for their profession. He realized that he had failed in past searches because, "I tried to fit into their mold. I tried to be what they wanted me to be. And in the end they wanted me to be someone I wasn't, and it was only when I actually found my voice at F&M [that I succeeded]."

Rather than leaving it to others to frame a potential inadequacy and concern when he wasn't there to defend it, in the Franklin & Marshall search, Fry took a different tack. He not only put the concern in his application letter, but he also addressed it head on in the first interview by saying, "This is who I am. This is what I believe in terms of my own values from an academic perspective, but I am not [an academic]. So let's get that straight right away." Reflecting on Franklin & Marshall, he is convinced that had he not named the concern and put it on the table, "I never would have gotten that job. I would have gotten all the way to end, and I never would have gotten that job."

Some nontraditional candidates may simply face less skepticism given their specific background and experience base in higher education. When asked how he



addressed concerns that may have existed by virtue of his nontraditional background during the Colby search, David Greene flatly stated, “That actually wasn’t an issue. I’m not sure how nontraditional I am now.” He did acknowledge that the process of winning over faculty is an issue for anyone coming from a nonacademic track, and that having an open dialogue about how to address their priorities is key.

A fourth lens the nontraditional presidents used to ascertain fit was to listen to their intuition when assessing chemistry with the institution. Beyond assessing alignment of the mission with a candidate’s personal values, the nontraditional presidents’ interviews pointed to more subjective personal chemistry as being a critical consideration when assessing whether a presidency is right. Interviews did not reveal any particular cookbook or structured checklist that the nontraditional presidents had used; rather, a more intuitive approach appears to have worked well. Given that a presidency is people-intensive, this makes sense.

One means that the nontraditional presidents used to ascertain chemistry was simply to spend time in informal settings with various stakeholders. The informal settings are clearly used by the institutions to assess interpersonal skills, table manners, points of view, stamina, or even the personality of their spouse or loved one, who are often invited at the later stages of a search. As Greene put it, “They’re really testing all the time.” However, informal settings are also a two-way street, affording presidential aspirants precious opportunities to size up the people with whom they may be spending years of their life.

In these informal settings, intuition and “gut-feel” seem to have been the *modus operandi* for some of the nontraditional candidates. Fry related that he formed

impressions of fit by asking himself, “How did the table feel when I was going through the search, and was it the kind of table that I felt I could have common ground and work with? Others just leave you feeling, “What a bunch of stiff.” Or, “they didn’t ask me any original or good questions. They didn’t even care to find out about my wife or my children. . . . You can just sort of tell.” Schall related that he ended up turning down his first presidential offer at a liberal arts college after the press release had been written while finalizing details on the contract because “there was something going on with the board that just didn’t feel right.”

The final lens that was used across the board was the fit with their family. Given the all-consuming nature of a presidential search, and the competitive nature of many candidates to win and get the offer, it might be possible to overlook more personal elements such as family. President Schall warned, “I think a lot of people, particularly in that first presidency, want to be president so much, [they] have a hard time paying attention to subtle things.” Candidates do this at their own risk, especially since the job is intense, and many liberal arts colleges are located in unfamiliar places, often in very rural environments. For loved ones, life can quickly take on the character of a fish bowl.

Some candidates are empty-nesters; some have no family and are single; and others have children still in school. Reflecting on the needs of their family and their ultimate well-being was an important area for the presidential candidate to consider. For Schall, this meant a more urban environment and a place where he and his wife could be “socially and politically active. . . . We’ve got a persona that just wouldn’t work in a lot of places.” He further cautioned, “These jobs are literally 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

jobs where there's no line between your personal and professional life . . . so unless it's a really comfortable place to be, life can just become unbearable.”

John Fry bluntly stated that the way he evaluated fit with the Franklin & Marshall opportunity was simply in these terms: “Would my children thrive in the new environment?” He added that he and his spouse placed a great deal of emphasis on evaluating the local schools. Before expending the substantial amounts of energy required to get to the end of a process, candidates would do well to think through up front if they are actually willing to live in a given location.

Ascertaining whether a given presidency is the right opportunity for a given candidate is not always easy to do up front. In some cases, the nontraditional candidate may be extremely familiar with the institution as a board member, alumnus, or administrative leader. For these candidates, the process may feel a bit like a student applying early decision. However, for most, the assessment of fit involves a complex set of considerations that are very personal in nature. What is a good fit for one candidate may be a terrible fit for another.

In many ways, the process resembles a sort of mating dance, with each participant sizing the other up. The use of the five lenses identified in the interviews would appear to be one means to render more explicit what is often an implicit process of reflection. At the end of a process, nontraditional candidates face the same conundrum many student applicants navigate each year whereby admissions—in this case, the search committee—may ask the question, “If we accept her, will she accept the offer?” Until the point of an offer, it would appear that candidates would be well served to convey their interest while privately assessing their fit through the different lenses.

#### **4. Presidents' experiences and advice to be successful in the transition process and beyond**

The focus on landing a college presidency can be so intense that it can be easy to forget that the announcement is really just the beginning of the process, not the end. Like a pie-eating contest where the prize is more pie, the interactions with and predispositions of various stakeholders only intensify once the president saddles up. The presidential interviews revealed that the transition process acts as a sort of process continuum, whereby the nontraditional candidate's perceived or real weaknesses are tested early. Although the complete set of imperatives a nontraditional president needs to deploy to be successful was beyond the scope of study, the presidents interviewed shared their advice and experiences for how to make the early onboarding transition process as fruitful as possible. Experiential advice for increasing professional transition success fell into four categories: faculty rapport, institutional history and norms, mindset, and role modeling.

The nontraditional presidents' first suggestion for a successful transition is to establish rapport and a working relationship with the faculty. An appointment as president far from guarantees that the faculty are energized and enamored with the idea. Every appointment brings disappointment. In many searches, prominent faculty members may have themselves been candidates, or supported a different candidate, and thus suffer wounded pride. The faculty concerns over nontraditional candidates observed by the search firm executives and the presidents themselves during the search processes do not simply disappear overnight. Despite official external declarations of "unanimous board support," often mentioned in a press release, the reality facing any new president—but even more so a nontraditional president—is that the journey to win over faculty hearts

and minds takes time. The presidents interviewed suggest that the investment to establish rapport with the faculty is not optional and should be at the very top of any new president's list of priorities.

In a world where the president has a significant say on faculty promotions, is an arbiter of resource allocations, and has historically been the *primus inter pares* among faculty, it is only rationale that faculty have a strong opinion and a vested interest in ensuring that the right president is at the helm. Tenured faculty have often made a life choice to dedicate their entire career to an institution. By contrast, several presidents are likely to come and go in a tenured faculty member's career.

The presidents interviewed agreed that winning over the faculty requires a time commitment and patience, and that there is no substitute for taking a personal approach. Fry related that, in his first months at Franklin & Marshall, he conducted a listening tour, meeting with tenured faculty and other constituents. He felt that the role of president in a liberal arts college is "like being the parish priest," where it is all about people and therefore no substitute for "building individual and small group relationships."

A simple gesture to establish personal rapport that worked for Fry included inviting everyone from the faculty on the last Friday of each month "for a beer and wine and cheese party at the house . . . open house, no speeches. . . . I was trying to set up a convivial environment." Longtime president and mentor William Bowen underlined the importance of outreach to the faculty, saying, "My advice would be to build alliances with the key faculty, make every effort you can to build friendships and to understand what they're doing . . . and to be willing to say, 'We have to make these choices, and here's the way I see the choices. What do you think?'"

Another mechanism nontraditional presidents used to build understanding with the faculty is to set expectations and explain how they like to make decisions. This involved sharing thoughts on their personal values, explaining how the president would like to be involved in decision making, or having a dialogue about how their priorities align with faculty interests.

When President Fry started getting directly involved in certain aspects of the tenure process out of what he believed was his fiduciary obligation, he went to the provost and tenure committee and said, “The tradition here has been [that] the provost comes over to the president’s office and presents the package and the president sits there like a potted plant . . . and [everything] goes to the board of trustees. . . . Those days are done. I’m going to read the files. I want access to the committee. I want to talk about the cases before they start. I want an interim update and I’ll put you on notice that there might be some times when I’m not going to support what you’re talking about.” Although it was uncomfortable for a committee used to viewing the tenure process as their unique prerogative, Fry related that it eventually created a constructive dialogue, but it meant that he had to be exceptionally well prepared and add value in the conversations.

The tendency for a nontraditional candidate to be framed as someone who is opposed to faculty interests is often counterproductive and may simply be false. Finding common ground is one solution to which nontraditional presidents referred. For David Greene, this entailed forthrightly explaining his priorities and how they aligned with faculty interests. For instance, he reminded faculty that his priorities involved “excellence of programs, the quality of faculty and student experience, and the support

we provide faculty and students in all kinds of different ways” and that securing resources in those areas was a good fit.

The nontraditional presidents’ second secret for a successful transition is to understand institutional history and cultural norms. Why things get done the way they do in a given college or university often is a result of specific cultural norms and traditions that have grown out of history across decades or even centuries. President Bowen’s advice for nontraditional presidents gearing up at a new institution is unequivocal: “I would understand the history of the place so that you don’t come in as a know-nothing in terms of how the place got to where it is. . . . Respect the history and understand it.” David Greene’s experience is that understanding the “nuance of context when thinking about decisions, . . . the vernacular of the institution, . . . the way power is distributed in the institution” is essential during a transition.

Whether it is honor codes, acronyms, mascots, building names, decision-making bodies and their associated processes, unspoken dress codes, or other norms such as presenting with exhibits or without notes, sitting or standing in various settings, or sharing information, the learning curve for a new president the first year is steep. Nevertheless, the interviews underlined the importance of making the transition to insider and investing the time to do so. The presidents also suggested that it is important during a transition period to understand the academic calendar, to allocate time judiciously to competing priorities, and to balance off-campus time with physical presence onsite. David Greene counseled new presidents to “be very strategic and very balanced. More so than on a university campus, the visibility of the president of a liberal arts college is

essential. . . . At the same time, working on development . . . [and] external and board issues, those are also important.”

According to the presidents, the third pillar of a successful transition is to adopt the right mindset. The mindset includes carefully considering in-going assumptions, biases, hypotheses about solutions, and being self-aware that the truth is often in the eyes of the beholder. The way in which a president views his or her role quickly translates into either a self-fulfilling prophecy and/or the way that person is perceived. The presidents underlined various ways nontraditional presidents can establish a constructive mindset in the first months.

It is important to be nonjudgmental and to establish an environment where difficult issues can be brought to the surface. For a new leader who is relatively unaware of skeletons in the closet, establishing communication lines is essential. President Fry felt that one of the more important skills he deployed during his transition was “identifying and trying to solve problems and not feeling like there should be any embarrassment. . . . We spent most of our time saying, ‘These three things aren’t so great, so what are we going to do about those?’” He added that they tempered raising issue areas by celebrating “our strengths and our successes in a way that made people feel really good.”

Others cautioned that being too hesitant, deliberative, or afraid of shared governance is unhelpful. In a world where many liberal arts colleges are under strain, Schall urged nontraditional presidents to see themselves “as an agent of change because just standing still will bring down most institutions.” Given that nontraditional presidents tend to be viewed as transformational change agents whether they like it or not, this



mindset makes eminent sense. That being said, Greene allowed that new presidents should go about their transition with a dose of “humility.”

A final pearl of wisdom for a successful transition is to model collaborative decision making. As the saying goes, “You only get one chance to make a first impression.” With expectations that many nontraditional candidates, particularly those from the corporate world, will exhibit top-down decision-making behaviors, the presidents felt that new president designates should eschew the temptation to go for quick wins and underscored the importance of establishing collaborative decision making from the start. Bowen advised nontraditional presidents to “emphasize a genuinely collaborative way of thinking, but at the same time retaining the responsibility to decide.” He cautioned presidents not to spend “too much time . . . in this, that, and the other effort to find consensus where there may not be consensus.”

Beyond the obvious scrutiny given to early personnel appointments, the interviews suggested that taking the time to gather inputs in a deliberative fashion pays dividends. For Fry, this took the form of a listening tour of all major constituencies over several months. What he gathered formed the basis for a white paper that he wrote as his New Year’s letter. As he put it, “I took my own notes. I did an old-fashioned consulting study where you go and show respect by going to their place and you listen to them.” Rather than articulate a key set of imperatives and a to-do list, the note instead focused on summarizing the questions that had been identified in the process and how he felt they should subsequently be solved. Rather than hitting the hornets’ nest, he felt that it “stirred up a lot of relief” and led stakeholders to believe they “could talk about . . . things.”

The presidents also shared some nuggets of wisdom that fall outside of the realm of selection and the early transition. Among these, nontraditional presidents were encouraged to be willing to think strategically; have the courage of convictions and be willing to make decisions based on them; build a strong team and make thoughtful appointments; and develop fund-raising capacities and new revenue streams.

## Chapter 8

### **Conclusion: The Increasingly Traditional Nontraditional President**

An implicit tension inherent in the vocabulary of a nontraditional versus a traditional president is the suggestion that there may be a right answer, or that the right answer may be linked to tenets of philosophy or a value system and set of traditions that are timeless and beyond debate. Despite differing opinions among search executives on what a nontraditional president actually is, or who hires such a person, analysis unambiguously indicates that nontraditional presidents are now commonplace in a diverse and evolving set of liberal arts colleges. In 2014 slightly more than one-third of liberal arts presidents were nontraditional using the Beardsley definition, although there is no indication that this number has been increasing in the past few years (and, in fact, may have slightly decreased). However, the long-term increase is dramatic. Experiences of search executives and nontraditional presidents alike further suggest that there are steps that aspiring nontraditional candidates can pursue to increase the likelihood of successfully navigating both the search and transition process in landing the right presidency.

#### *Liberal Arts Colleges: Like a Rose*

Examination of the liberal arts college context and its attraction to nontraditional presidents revealed a landscape reminiscent of the rose. No two rose species are alike. Much the same can be said of liberal arts institutions, where each college appears to be a segment of one with its own unique traditions and economic situation. The liberal arts is a beautiful but expensive form of education, where great care and fertile intellectual ground allow the next generation's leadership skills and knowledge to bloom. From the

hardy hansa rugosa rose that can weather any harsh winter or storm, to the fragile but seductively fragrant chartreuse de parme magenta tea rose, many hybrids of the liberal arts model have emerged through the centuries as a result of mission drift. Opinions abound as to how to make roses thrive, and which one is the best. Nontraditional presidents that reach the presidency often find it to be a process with the allure of conquering beauty but with the thorn of financial difficulties and the blight of criticism at many turns. A liberal arts presidency is a difficult job.

*Future Context: Hope and Storm Clouds*

The feeling among the presidents is that the liberal arts presidency is not about to get easier any time soon. Although there was confidence that the elite will do well, for the non-elite most opinions pointed to the struggle getting even more complicated or even reaching a dangerous tipping point. The presidents felt that the future will require presidents to pursue innovations such as partnerships, alternative revenue streams, and decreased time to degree through ideas such as a three-year degree, intensified internationalization, and embracing of technology—the type of change often associated with more nontraditional profiles.

The quantitative analysis on the financial situation, including the case studies, shows that the financial parameters and trends facing most liberal arts colleges are challenging. High and rising tuition discounts resulting from the non-loan merit aid sweepstakes race, increasing competition for students from public universities, ever-rising list-price tuitions, a value proposition that is increasingly under attack, the emergence of new technologies, the inability of many institutions to increase net revenue, and an inability to control expenses paints a foreboding picture of the foreseeable future.

For the wealthier institutions that have created a successful philanthropy model and huge asset base, they will be able to weather any storm for years to come. As for most of the rest, alternative revenue streams, increased philanthropy, or a change in business model or mission orientation will be required to hold ground. Liberal arts colleges have proven to be remarkably resilient through the centuries, and the vast majority should survive the next 10 years; it will just be tough sledding for presidents, but for a worthy cause. The challenging financial context looking forward will almost certainly increase the importance of a presidential candidate's ability to address this context, which ultimately will be perhaps more important than being traditional or nontraditional.

#### *Nontraditional Definitions Abound*

Sports pundits debate whether the Seattle Seahawks' coach Pete Carroll should have let all-star running back Marshawn Lynch run the ball from the one-yard line instead of passing and giving up an interception to the New England Patriots in the closing seconds of Super Bowl XLIX, or whether Ted Williams would have surpassed most batting records had he not given up five years at his prime to World War II and the Korean War. Equally, there is no shortage of opinions among search executives as to the definition of a nontraditional president. The search committee executives did not agree on a common definition for traditional and nontraditional presidents beyond agreeing that a total stranger is nontraditional, and a provost-turned-president is traditional; in between, search executives draw the line at different parts of the spectrum. This definitional heterogeneity is puzzling and worrisome because the practice of framing and sorting candidates into traditional and nontraditional categories is widespread, and conversations are carried out as if everyone knows exactly what the terms actually mean.

The nontraditional presidents, for their part, felt that the distinction between traditional and nontraditional was increasingly meaningless, particularly in a world where the skill set required to lead as president and to understand higher education can take so many forms. Each of them, for their part, has already been president or worked in higher education for decades, yet they are still branded with the scarlet letters NT. Although I did not study this in detail, it is highly likely that this confusion extends to other leadership searches in higher education outside the liberal arts, given that the same search executives conduct those searches. Given the incredibly challenging context facing most liberal arts institutions, it would appear that energy be better spent on assessing capabilities with regard to the challenges at hand, rather than focusing on nontraditional versus traditional nomenclature that no one agrees on anyway.

*The Number of Nontraditional Presidents Is Growing Dramatically over the Long Term*

A longitudinal comparison shows that the number of nontraditional presidents has increased over time, doubling with regard to the Birnbaum and growing even more so with regard to the Cohen and March definitions, respectively. As measured by the ACE Pathways to the Presidency methodology (2013), presidents in the liberal arts are much more likely to be recruited from other academic officer or nonacademic officer positions such as dean, and much less likely to be recruited from a provost or chief academic officer position. The percentage of liberal arts presidents coming from outside higher education is broadly similar to the population of overall presidents. Per the Beardsley definition, one-third of liberal arts presidents are nontraditional, a substantial number in absolute terms. Viewed in the context of the last 35 years, the increase in nontraditional presidents is dramatic. Per the more stringent Cohen and March (1986) definition of a

traditional president that was the norm until at least the late 1980s, 62% of 2014 liberal arts college presidents were nontraditional and not recruited from another presidency or provost/chief academic officer, up from less than 10% in the 1980s.

Looking forward, independent of the definition chosen, it is hard to imagine a world where the number of nontraditional presidents will decline in the liberal arts sphere. William Bowen's (2015) well-documented massive reduction in tenured or tenure-track faculty during the past 40 years, and the expected continued reduction in tenure-track faculty going forward, is one reason. Another reason is that nontraditional candidates are associated with change, transformation, and crisis, and this is becoming a common situation at many colleges. Finally, there appear to be many new pools of candidates emerging such as deans, non-tenure-track faculty, existing nontraditional presidents (such as those interviewed in this research), or administrators who have an appreciation for higher education's context and the world of faculty but just aren't from the tenured ranks.

The net result is that the traditional versus nontraditional president debate and sorting device is becoming increasingly anachronistic and may have outlived its utility. Given the challenges facing liberal arts colleges, there is an increasingly large spectrum of experiences that allow presidential candidates to be selected and to achieve legitimacy and impact. However, most presidential pathways will continue to involve developing an appreciation for and understanding of higher education before taking the helm. As such, qualified "traditional" candidates who seek a presidency will remain formidable indeed.

### *Search Firms Are Now Presidential Insiders*

Decades ago, college presidency succession processes resembled more of an insular, Vatican-like papal process with a puff of smoke to coronate a new leader. Today search firm executives have become insiders and play a central role in externally locating and placing presidential talent, much like a high-end real estate consultant brokers deals simultaneously balancing buyer and seller interests. The research unambiguously pointed to the importance of nontraditional candidates cultivating networks with search executives and provided an interesting window into how nontraditional candidates are stereotypically viewed, and can better prepare themselves for success. Right or wrong, nontraditional candidates are often perceived and positioned as change agents, and thus considered less suitable for more elite colleges. Equally, the interviews demonstrated that there is far from one uniform opinion on nontraditional candidates among search firm executives.

### *Searches Are Evolving in Ways That Potentially Favor Nontraditional Candidates*

From their perch, search firm executives' observations on trends in liberal arts president searches during the past decade confirmed many of the financial challenges I underlined in the quantitative examination of the liberal arts. All three sources of data—the quantitative contextual analysis, search firm, and presidential interviews—confirm that the liberal arts context overall is very challenging although quite varied and segmented from institution to institution. Search executives observed an increased willingness on behalf of selection committees to consider nontraditional candidates and noted that the candidate pools were increasingly diverse with deans becoming a bigger source of presidential talent. Search executives felt that a difficult financial and



competitive context has made the presidency less attractive and more difficult in general, particularly to traditional candidates who see presidents' lives firsthand.

Ironically, as a result, a presidency is more fertile ground for a nontraditional candidate to be selected given the need for change and innovation at many institutions. Search executives pointed out that nontraditional candidates, who take the time to understand higher education and its financial model, and to build up their credentials through judicious career moves and apprenticeship, have a better chance to be selected. They cautioned that all nontraditional candidates have to find a way to establish minimum credibility with faculty. Nontraditional presidents agreed with the need for change at many institutions, and the benefit of being prepared, but added that nontraditional candidates will increase chances for success in a selection process by being authentic, putting issues on the table, and learning by trying different searches versus seeking a 'silver bullet'.

*Certain College Characteristics Indicate a Greater Likelihood to Have a Nontraditional President*

The quantitative research and analysis revealed that certain characteristics of liberal arts colleges are associated with a meaningfully higher presence of nontraditional candidates. Liberal arts institutional characteristics that increased the presence of nontraditional presidents in 2014 included: smaller size, lower graduation rates, religious affiliation, lower wealth, lower selectivity, location in the South or North, and a lower ranking, among others. Of all the characteristics, ranking appears to be the best predictor overall.

The results do not prove that the characteristics are causal in the selection of a nontraditional president, but rather that the prevalence of nontraditional presidents in 2014 varies meaningfully when one examines certain characteristics. Search firm executives themselves were divided as to what type of liberal arts college characteristic best determined the presence of a nontraditional president. Most cited ranking as a defining characteristic but then disagreed on whether more highly ranked or lower-ranked colleges were more likely to hire a nontraditional president. Other characteristics to which search executives pointed were a crisis or a need for change, or a selection committee that is board-dominated.

In some instances, quantitative results contradicted the point of view of certain search firm executives, while in others it confirmed their point of view (such as those who said higher-ranked institutions hire fewer nontraditional presidents). In many cases such as religious affiliation, size, graduation rate, endowment, geography, or selectivity, search firm executives did not mention the variable (although ranking is a hybrid variable that incorporates financial, graduation rate, and selectivity elements). What is equally clear is that there are both traditional and nontraditional presidents in every segment and that, overall, traditional presidents outnumber nontraditional presidents two to one. But for aspiring nontraditional presidential candidates, they would be well served to examine the characteristics of the institution they are considering, as it may provide a reality check on the likelihood of a match.

#### *Finding the Right Presidency Is Possible*

Increasing the odds of finding the right presidency is possible. While the search executives' experiences pointed out strategies nontraditional candidates should consider

to succeed in getting a presidential offer, and the quantitative data provided insight into the characteristics of institutions that currently hire more nontraditional candidates, the nontraditional presidential interviews provided insight into how they shaped their careers and how to think about whether to pursue a given search or offer. Although each of the nontraditional presidents had his own stories and background, all three had gained experience in higher education in various administrative roles prior to assuming a presidency, had a genuine passion for the liberal arts, and appeared to enjoy the role as president, all things considered.

The nontraditional presidents confirmed that searches are not only about getting an offer. A presidential candidate needs to ensure that the position and institution is a good fit with their skill set and the right choice in the context of their life, given that presidencies are all consuming. To increase the chances of finding the right presidency, the interviewees revealed several lenses that candidates could use to consider a presidency, including values, fit with family, examining the problems to be solved, and stakeholder chemistry. The presidents encouraged presidential candidates to use their intuition and how they felt after meetings as an important barometer. Each nontraditional president counseled that being authentic and “putting elephants on the table” was central both to increasing the chances of selection and having a good fit.

### *Successful Transitions Are Not by Chance*

In many ways, assuming a presidency is the continuation of the selection process and a critical step in ensuring that the momentum and hope generated translate into a strong start. The experiences of the presidents suggest that considering four themes during a transition can enhance the chances of success in a transition process. There was

all-around agreement that nontraditional presidents enhance a transition by going out of their way to establish faculty rapport and investing time to understand their institution's history and norms. Taking a personal approach and learning how shared governance works in the specific context are means to accomplish this. For some, their experience suggested adopting a nonjudgmental and collaborative mindset as a key component to building trust and making a successful transition. For others, being patient and modeling values through early actions—such as key appointments or approaches to problem solving—were essential.

### *Anticipating Future Research*

This research effort examined the topic of nontraditional presidents at stand-alone liberal arts colleges. The analysis investigated the several aspects of this topic, including the definition, number, and pathways of current nontraditional presidents; the liberal arts context and how specific institutions' characteristics relate to the choice of a nontraditional president; the viewpoint and experiences of search firm executives on the selection process and nontraditional presidents; and college presidents' viewpoints and lessons learned on getting it right in the selection and transition process. Collected through a combination of qualitative interviews and a quantitative database, the data present a compelling case that at liberal arts colleges nontraditional presidents have moved from an unusual event three decades ago to a common occurrence, albeit with greatly varying prevalence depending on a college's characteristics. The collective wisdom and experiences of the search firm executives and presidents provide constructive and practical ideas for how to increase the chances of success for aspiring nontraditional presidents.

Future research will explore whether the same answers hold true in other higher education institution archetypes, including large public and private research universities, community colleges, or other specialized segments. In particular, it would be instructive to examine whether the percentage of nontraditional presidents is similar in each segment and whether the same characteristic patterns of those colleges and universities that hire a nontraditional president extend outside the liberal arts. It would be equally instructive to study whether the same patterns that apply to a liberal arts nontraditional president hold for deans of various professional schools such as law, business, public policy, or medicine.

The research quantified the number of nontraditional presidents there are and how their prevalence varied depending on specific characteristics of the institution such as size, wealth, ranking, or graduation rate. However, the research was unable to discern the actual probability that a nontraditional candidate would be selected within a search since the composition of the candidate pools is unknown. In other words, research on the number of nontraditional versus traditional candidates who apply and advance to different stages of searches could provide better understanding of the actual odds, applicant demand, and pass-through rates. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in many searches nontraditional candidates represent a minority of candidates interviewed, often to ensure some diversity in the candidate pools. If this were true, this would suggest that nontraditional candidates, once in the interview pool, perform well if they now represent one-third of liberal arts presidents.

Being selected as a president is one thing, being successful once in office is quite another. Although the research provided insights on how nontraditional presidents can

get off to a good start, the research did not examine whether there was any meaningful difference in the impact of a nontraditional president versus a traditional president. Future research could examine impact from a qualitative point of view. Perhaps more compelling, though, would be to examine whether the performance trajectory—as measured by financial or selectivity or outcome data during the time periods they are in office—varies meaningfully between nontraditional and traditional presidents. A variant on this theme would be to examine the characteristics of presidents—other than being traditional or nontraditional—who successfully lead improving versus declining institutions.

Most college presidencies involve the use of a search firm. Each search firm executive has his or her own set of experiences and biases that may or may not influence the outcome of a given search. However, there is little information as to the type of president selected by search firm. Future research could attempt to discern whether or not the type of president selected bears any relationship to the search firm or executive involved.

One striking finding was that, in 2014, women are far more likely to be a traditional liberal arts college president than a nontraditional president. However, the research was unable to answer why that might be the case and whether the same observation may hold with respect to other forms of diversity. Future research could study whether the dearth of nontraditional women presidents is related to lack of candidate pool interest, difficulties in advancing, or other factors, and examine whether the same phenomenon exists with other areas of diversity. The research could also examine the experience of women nontraditional presidents.

Liberal arts colleges have been a crucial pillar of the US higher education landscape for centuries. The opportunity to lead such storied institutions is a high honor that, until the 1980s and 1990s, had been the quasi-exclusive domain of someone in a traditional career climbing the academic ladder. Since then, the rise of search firm executives' influence as consiglieri to selection committees, a change in presidents' pathways to include one-third nontraditional presidents, and a difficult liberal arts college context has immutably changed the complexion of the liberal arts presidency. By all accounts, it has become a difficult job.

For nontraditional presidential aspirants who prepare thoughtfully and credibly for a presidency, achieving the pinnacle is increasingly within the realm of possibility. Perhaps the most important conclusion for aspirants is that they should heed the Chinese proverb that says, "Be careful what you wish for." For liberal arts colleges and search firms, the question and dialogue in the future will be less about traditional versus nontraditional and more about attracting and finding presidents with the requisite skill sets and desire to address what is becoming an increasingly complex equation to solve.

## Appendix A: Example Recruitment and Interview Materials

To: Executive Search Firm Executive

From: Scott C. Beardsley

Purpose: Request to Participate in Doctoral Dissertation Research

As a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, located at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I am writing to ask your willingness to participate in research. The U Penn Institutional Review Board (IRB) research protocol requires a formal letter.

The dissertation research is focused upon the topic of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents. The research is building a database of all 251 stand-alone liberal arts institutions as defined by *U.S. News & World Report*, key financial and selectivity data for each institution, as well as the backgrounds of their current presidents. However, to understand how nontraditional candidates are viewed and perceived during the selection process, experienced executive search consultants are being interviewed to discern how they experience and have experienced nontraditional candidates in liberal arts presidency searches. You have been selected because of your experience in executive search with liberal arts colleges and/or nontraditional candidates.

The interview will involve a series of questions revolving around nontraditional presidential candidates in the liberal arts context, and trends. It is anticipated that the interview will be 60 to 90 minutes in length, and would ideally be in person with the researcher (me) travelling to you. If in-person is not possible, then a phone call will be organized. The expected timeframe is August and/or September depending on scheduling. I will record the conversation for transcription of notes. It is possible that there will be a few follow-up questions that may be dealt with by email or phone. It is not expected that there will be any compensation or incurred expense to you, but please let me know if any expenses would be incurred on your side and I am happy to work with you to ensure you do not incur any expense. If you agree to participate, I will forward a consent form for signature required by the IRB prior to the interview.

My email address is [scott.beardsley@gmail.com](mailto:scott.beardsley@gmail.com). A copy of my bio is attached to give you background about myself. Although I am a management consultant, it should be clearly stated that this research has nothing to do with McKinsey & Company and is conducted in my capacity as a doctoral researcher at U Penn. My USA cell phone is +12078120000 and my Belgian cell phone is +32477480220. A copy of my bio is attached.

Sincerely yours,

Scott Beardsley



## Example Interview Protocol Nontraditional President

Time of interview:

Date, Place:

Interviewer: Scott Beardsley

Interviewee: College President

Position of Interviewee: Former college president

(Briefly describe the project): Nontraditional Liberal Arts College Presidents

Questions:

1. What is your career story since university, including specific career positions?
2. What were your experiences just prior to entering the academy and the presidency?
3. What factors shaped your interest and motivation to be a president at X? How did it unfold?
4. How would you describe the context (competitive, selectivity, financial, other) facing your college when you became college president? What happened?
5. Who was the search executive on your presidency? If there is one other person I should talk to about your selection, whom would you recommend?
6. How did you examine “fit” in both the selection process and during the presidency (motivation to pursue, personal, geographic; fit with previous job; timing and readiness; fit with institutional needs, fit with institutional characteristics, fit with institutional culture; interpersonal chemistry with institutional members?) Examples?
7. Tell me about which career experiences (or lack thereof) and skills helped or hindered you in the selection process and how and to what extent did you address any barriers or build on positive factors to influence the selection committee?
8. What advice do you have for nontraditional candidates in the process and what does it take to be successful?
9. How would you characterize the challenges facing stand-alone liberal arts colleges today? How do you see the future?

## Example Interview Protocol Executive Search Firm Executive

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Scott Beardsley

Interviewee: Executive Search Firm Executive

Position of Interviewee: Executive Search Firm Consultant (institution)

(Briefly describe the project): Nontraditional Liberal Arts College Presidents

Questions:

1. What is your career background in executive search and experience with liberal arts presidential searches?
2. How would you describe the context (competitive, selectivity, financial, other) facing liberal arts colleges? How is it shaping what they are looking for in a president?
3. How would you define a nontraditional candidate?
4. Based on your experience, what factors help or hinder nontraditional candidates versus traditional candidates? Examples?
5. How have you and search committees experienced or considered fit in the selection process, and what do successful nontraditional candidates do to overcome perceived weaknesses?
6. Which type (what are the characteristics) of liberal arts institutions are most likely to consider or hire nontraditional candidates?
7. Looking back over the past 10+ years, what are the most important trends in liberal arts presidential searches and what are the implications for search firms and nontraditional candidates?
8. How do you see the future?

## **Appendix B: Data Request Memo**

To: Axel Olson

From: Scott Beardsley

The purpose of this memo is to summarize and structure the data request to populate a unique spreadsheet database on liberal arts colleges and their presidents that will be used in my dissertation on nontraditional liberal arts college presidents.

### **DEFINITIONS**

*Liberal arts college:* The definition of a liberal arts school is as per defined in the *U.S. News & World Report* 2013 ranking report. There are 251 liberal arts colleges defined in that report.

*Traditional college president:* someone who has been a full-time, tenure-track faculty member and come up through the academic ranks to be a chair, dean, provost, or chief academic officer (Cohen & March 1986). If a president does not meet the definition of traditional, then they are considered to be not traditional.

*Scholar:* traditional as per above.

*Steward:* One definition by Birnbaum specifies that someone who has had an entire career in higher education but come through the administrative or dean roles is called a steward (Birnbaum, 2001).

*Spanner:* According to Birnbaum, someone who has had part of his or her career outside of higher education and not been a tenure-track professor but has at some point gained experience in higher education prior to becoming a president.

*Stranger:* According to Birnbaum, a president who has never worked in higher education prior to becoming a president.

*Outside Higher Education:* According to the ACE Pathway to the Presidency, a president from outside higher education is someone whose previous job was from outside of higher education. To be able to compare with this survey, this data must be captured.

### **DATA TO BE GATHERED**

For each liberal arts school, the following institutional data fields should be gathered from the *U.S. News & World Report* (USNWR) database, the college's website, NACUBO, and IPEDS, with the source each time clearly indicated:

#### **General Liberal Arts College Institution Data**

- Name of institution
- Location (city, state)
- Region (North, South, West, Midwest) as per USNWR definition on page 78
- Ranking
- Ranking decile (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, . . . 10<sup>th</sup>)
- Number of students
- Selectivity (acceptance rate %)
- Religious affiliation (as identified in USNWR) yes or no
- Religious affiliation: name of church
- Private (yes=private, no=public); there are 27 public liberal arts colleges per USNWR and they are identified with an asterisk in the publication
- Current list price tuition, room, board, and fees (from USNWR)

### **Financial data per institution**

- Endowment: \$millions (rounded to nearest million) for 2012 or 2013 using whichever year has most complete data (from NACUBO and USNWR); please specify source
- FTE students (in same year as endowment data from IPEDS—under institutional characteristics; estimated undergraduate enrollment; total; note the FTE number of students is different from what USNWR reports)
- Endowment per FTE
- List-price tuition and fees (specifically from IPEDS: student charges; price of attendance for full-time, first-time undergraduate student tuition and fees; this will need to be for 2011–2012 or 2012–2013, whichever has more complete data): variable (a)
- Core revenues per FTE enrollment by source; from IPEDS sub click revenues from tuition and fees per FTE (GASB); same year either 2011–2012 or 2012–2013; variable (b)
- Discount rate:  $\% = (1 - (a/b)) * 100$
- Core revenues total dollars, GASB (IPEDS)
- Core expenses total dollars, GASB (IPEDS)
- Tuition and fees as % of total revenues (IPEDS)
- Tuition and fee revenues total dollars (IPEDS)
- Total FTE staff (IPEDS)
- Total instructional staff (IPEDS)
- Instructional staff as % of total FTE staff (derived)

- Core expenses as % of total revenues (derived from above)
- Tuition and fees as a % of total expenses (derived from above: variable name tuition dependence)

### **Liberal Arts College President Pathway Data**

For each liberal arts school, pathway data will be captured on the current and preceding president. The sources for each president's data will be captured in the spreadsheet. Data to be captured include:

- Name of liberal arts college
- President name
- Date entered office
- Gender
- Years in office as of June 2014
- Immediate prior position
  - Job title
  - Employer/institution name
  - Promoted to presidency from within the liberal arts institution? (yes or no); this provides comparability with the ACE survey data
  - Job category (outside of higher education, president, chief academic officer or provost, other higher education officer, chair or faculty)
  - If not higher education, job category (business, political/military, religious, other)
- Second most recent position
  - Job title
  - Employer/institution name

- Promoted to position from within the liberal arts institution? (yes or no); this provides comparability with the ACE survey data
- Job category (outside of higher education, president, chief academic officer or provost, other higher education officer, chair or faculty)
- If outside of higher education, job category (business, political/military, religious, other)
- Doctorate? (yes or no)
- if yes, type of doctorate (PhD, EdD, JD, MD, other)
- Full-time, tenure-track experience (yes or no) at any time (assistant professor, associate professor, professor are indications of tenure track)? (Yes=traditional, no = not traditional)
- Other faculty experience? (yes or no)
- Other faculty experience (yes=lecturer, or adjunct, No=none)
- First-time college president? (yes or no)
- Birnbaum category (scholar, steward, spanner, stranger)
- Other previous experience in higher education beyond two immediate prior positions?
- Description of higher education experience (faculty, administration, trustee, other); if necessary, create a comment data field
- Alumni of institution? (yes or no)
- Previous employment at current institution where president?
- Comments
- Sources: put in links

## Appendix C: IPEDS Institutional Variable Description Summary

The following variable description tables summarize variables for which data was collected on both the first- and second-generation of presidents. Due to the fact that data on some variables could not always be found, the sample size for which there is complete information may vary from variable to variable.

Several variables were examined only for certain groups of presidents such as nontraditional presidents per the Beardsley definition. Such variables are indicated with an asterisk (\*) in front of the variable's name. The subgroups examined for such variables are described in the descriptions of these variables.

Variable Name	Description	Source(s)	Year
Name of Institution	The name of the US News liberal arts institution in question.	US NEWS	2014
Location (city, state)	City and state in which the institution is located or headquartered.	US NEWS	2014
State	State in which institution is located or headquartered.	US NEWS	2014
Region	Each institution, depending on in which state the institution is located, was assigned to a geographical region: North, South, West, Midwest, as defined by US News.	DERIVED	2014
2014 USNWR Ranking	<p>The ranking assigned to an institution by US News.</p> <p><b>Ranking #</b>—182 schools were ranked between 1 and 180 by US News. In some cases, the same ranking is given to more than one institution.</p> <p><b>RNP</b>—Rank Not Published means that US News did calculate a numerical rank and score for that school, but decided for editorial reasons that since the school ranked below the US News cutoff— the top three-fourths of each ranking category are numerically ranked—that US News would not publish the rank and score for that school on usnews.com (US NEWS FAQ page)</p> <p><b>Unranked</b>—Unranked means that US News did not calculate a numerical rank for that school. The school did not qualify to be numerically ranked by US News. Schools marked as Unranked are listed alphabetically and are listed below those marked as Rank Not Published. (US NEWS FAQ page)</p>	US NEWS	2014



Ranking Tier—six tiers	The 248 liberal arts institutions were sorted into six tiers. The following breakdown was chosen:  1st tier: institutions ranked 1–50 2nd tier: institutions ranked 51–100 3rd tier: institutions ranked 101–150 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5th tier: institutions ranked 151–248 (includes unranked)	DERIVED from US NEWS ranking data	2014
Religious Affiliation	Whether or not the institution has a religious affiliation.  1 = institution has a religious affiliation 0 = otherwise	US NEWS	2014
Name of Church (if applicable)	The name of the church to which the institution is affiliated, if applicable.	US NEWS	2014
Private	Whether or not the institution is private.  1= institution is private, 0=otherwise	US NEWS	2014
Fall 2012 Acceptance Rate	The ratio of the number of students admitted to the number of applicants for fall 2012 admission. The acceptance rate is equal to the total number of students admitted divided by the total number of applicants.  Both the applications and acceptances counted only first-time, first-year students. <sup>3</sup>	US NEWS	Fall 2012
Name of President	First and last name of non-interim president. President was chosen by examining the liberal arts college's website in June 2014. If an incoming, non-interim college president was identified with a full biography at that time, this incoming president was profiled in lieu of the current, outgoing president. Otherwise, the current non-interim president, as of June 2014, was profiled.  In the event of a president having died or resigned as of that date, AND in the absence of a new president being inaugurated, the name of the president who died or resigned is used.	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Gender	Whether the president in question is male or female.	Diverse sources.	Internet search conducted in June 2014

<sup>3</sup>“Best Colleges Ranking Criteria and Weights.” *U.S. News & World Report*, 4 September 2014. Retrieved 10 September 2014.

Date Entered Office	Only for 1 <sup>st</sup> -generation presidents—the date on which the president began their presidency. For the incoming presidents who were profiled, the date on which the president will take office is used.	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Years in Office	<p>The number of years in which the president has been in office.</p> <p><b>For 1<sup>st</sup>-generation presidents</b>, years in office was calculated by dividing the difference between the date research took place (i.e., 6/1/2014) and the date the president entered office by 365. Rounded to 1 decimal point.</p> <p>In the event of a president having died or having resigned as of that date, AND in the absence of a new president being inaugurated, the length of time in office is calculated as of the date of that president's death or resignation, not June 2014.</p> <p>In the case of incoming presidents, the value for this variable is set at zero (not a negative number).</p> <p><b>For 2<sup>nd</sup>-generation presidents</b>, years in office was calculated to the nearest month. If the month(s) of the year(s) the person entered or left office as president were not specified, then an annual calculation was made—that is, the difference between the years the person left and entered office.</p>	Derived	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Full-time faculty experience (F) = Beardsley Definition of Traditional	<p>Whether or not the president is or has been tenure-track faculty during their career.</p> <p>1 = the president has full-time faculty experience 0 = the president does not have full-time faculty experience</p> <p>Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Professor, Provost/CAO, or Chair were used as indications of full-time tenure track.</p>	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
*If no full-time faculty experience, other faculty exp.?	<p>For a president who was never tenure-track faculty during his/her career, whether or not he/she has other faculty experience. Indications of other faculty experience included the titles: lecturer and adjunct faculty/professor.</p> <p>1 = lecturer or adjunct 0 = otherwise</p>	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Job title of immediate prior position	The job title of the president's immediate prior position (i.e., last job before assuming current position as president).	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014

Most recent former employer	Specifies the employer at the president's immediate prior position.	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Job title of next-to-immediate prior position	The job title of the president's immediate prior position (i.e., the next-to-last job before assuming current position as president).	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
2nd most recent former employer	Specifies the employer at the president's next-to-immediate prior position.	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
HE1—higher education immediate prior position	Whether or not the president's immediate prior position was in higher education.  1 = immediate prior position was in higher education—i.e., employed by a higher education institution. 0 = otherwise	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Promoted internally?	Whether or not the president was hired as president from within. In other words, whether or not the president's current employer and most recent former employer are the same liberal arts college.  1 = current employer and most recent former employer are the same liberal arts college 0 = otherwise	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
HE 2—higher education next-to-immediate prior position	Whether or not the president's next-to-immediate prior position was in higher education.  1 = next-to-immediate position was in higher education—i.e., employed by a higher education institution. 0 = otherwise	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Derived: Scholar	Comes from the Birnbaum definition of scholar <sup>4</sup> and means whether or not the president was tenure-track faculty AND both of his/her last two positions prior to assuming current presidency were in higher education.  Following Birnbaum, 1 = [F=1, HE1=1, HE2=1] 0 = otherwise	Derived	Internet search conducted in June 2014

<sup>4</sup> Birnbaum, R., & Umbach, P. D. (2001). "Scholar, Steward, Spanner, Stranger: The Four Career Paths of College Presidents." *The Review of Higher Education*, (24)3, 203–17. Project MUSE.

Derived: Steward	Comes from the Birnbaum definition of steward <sup>5</sup> and means whether or not the president was NOT tenure-track faculty AND both of his/her last two positions prior to assuming current presidency were in higher education.  Following Birnbaum, 1 = [F=0, HE1=1, HE2=1] 0 = otherwise	Derived	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Derived: Spanner	Comes from the Birnbaum definition of spanner <sup>6</sup> and means whether or not the president was NOT tenure-track faculty AND just one out of his/her last two positions prior to assuming current presidency were in higher education.  Following Birnbaum: 1 = {F=0, HE1=0, HE2=1 OR F=0, HE1=1, HE2=0} 0 = otherwise	Derived	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Derived: Stranger	Comes from the Birnbaum definition of stranger <sup>7</sup> and means whether or not the president was NOT tenure-track faculty AND neither of his/her last two positions prior to assuming current presidency were in higher education.  Following Birnbaum, 1 = [F=0, HE1=0, HE2=0] 0 = otherwise	Derived	Internet search conducted in June 2014
First-time college president?	Whether or not the president has assumed the role of college president for the first time.  1 = this is the president's first college presidency 0 = otherwise	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
(F) Category 6: College President	This definition attempts to mirror the ACE Pathways to the President definition. In this definition, it is determined whether or not the previous role was a college president of another institution. If yes, they are noted and then excluded from the analyses of first-time college presidents.  1 = immediate prior position was as college president 0 = otherwise	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014

<sup>5</sup> Birnbaum, R., & Umbach, P. D. (2001). "Scholar, Steward, Spanner, Stranger: The Four Career Paths of College Presidents." *The Review of Higher Education*, (24)3, 203–17. *Project MUSE*.

<sup>6</sup> Birnbaum, R., & Umbach, P. D. (2001). "Scholar, Steward, Spanner, Stranger: The Four Career Paths of College Presidents." *The Review of Higher Education*, (24)3, 203–17. *Project MUSE*.

<sup>7</sup> Birnbaum, R., & Umbach, P. D. (2001). "Scholar, Steward, Spanner, Stranger: The Four Career Paths of College Presidents." *The Review of Higher Education*, (24)3, 203–17. *Project MUSE*.

Interim/acting president	<p>This category shows whether or not the president's immediate prior position was as an interim or acting president. If a person was an interim or acting president, he/she was not considered to be a first-time president and was thus excluded from the sample of first-time presidents to mirror the ACE Pathways to the Presidency report. However, the number of presidents whose previous job was as an interim president is recorded.</p> <p>1 = immediate prior position was as interim/acting college president 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014
(A) Category 1: CAO, Provost, or Dean of Faculty	<p>This definition attempts to mirror the ACE Pathways to the Presidency definition.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not the president's immediate prior position was as chief academic officer (CAO) or provost or dean of faculty.</p> <p>1 = immediate prior position was as chief academic officer or provost or dean of faculty 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014
(B) Category 2: Other Academic Officer	<p>This definition attempts to mirror the ACE Pathways to the Presidency Definition.<sup>9</sup> Whether or not the president's immediate prior position was as an Other Academic Officer.</p> <p>This category includes positions with titles such as:</p> <p>Dean of an Academic College or Graduate School; examples include: Dean, Arts and Letters; Dean Arts and Science; Dean, Biological and Life Sciences; Dean, Business; Dean, Engineering; Dean, Humanities; Dean, Law; Dean, Occupational Studies/Vocational Education/Technology; Dean, Sciences; Dean, Social Sciences; Chief Health Professions Officer; Chief Research Officer; Dean, Continuing Education; Dean, Graduate Programs; Dean, Instruction; Dean, Undergraduate Programs; Director, Continuing Education; Vice Provost; Associate Provost; Assistant Provost; Dean Academic Affairs; (Acting) VP Academic Affairs; Dean Educational Affairs</p> <p>1 = immediate prior position falls into Other Academic Officer category 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014

<sup>8</sup> King, Y. M., & Cook, B. J. (2013, March). On the pathway to the presidency 2013: Characteristics of higher education's senior leadership. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

<sup>9</sup> King, Y. M., & Cook, B. J. (2013, March). On the pathway to the presidency 2013: Characteristics of higher education's senior leadership. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

(C) Category 3: Nonacademic Officer	<p>This definition attempts to mirror the ACE Pathways to the Presidency Definition.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not the president's immediate prior position was as a Nonacademic Officer.</p> <p>This category includes positions with titles such as:</p> <p>Chief of Staff; Executive Vice President; Senior Vice President; VP Administration; Senior Administrative Officer; Chief Admin Officer; Chief Business Officer, Chief Financial Officer; Chief Human Resources Officer; Chief Legal Affairs Officer; General Counsel; Chief Development Officer; Chief External Affairs Officer; Director, Community Services; Director of Gov't Relations; Chief Enrollment Management Officer; Chief Student Affairs/Life Officer; Chief Diversity Officer; Director of Institutional Diversity; generic VP</p> <p>1 = immediate prior position falls into Nonacademic Officer category 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014
(D) Category 4: Chair/Faculty	<p>This definition attempts to mirror the ACE Pathways to the Presidency Definition.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not the president's immediate prior position was as a department chair or faculty member, as defined by the Beardsley ACE category mapping.</p> <p>Chair/faculty includes directing or heading institutes and special initiatives.</p> <p>1 = immediate prior position was as a chair/faculty 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014

<sup>10</sup> King, Y. M., & Cook, B. J. (2013, March). On the pathway to the presidency 2013: Characteristics of higher education's senior leadership. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

<sup>11</sup> King, Y. M., & Cook, B. J. (2013, March). On the pathway to the presidency 2013: Characteristics of higher education's senior leadership. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

(E) Category 5: OHE	<p>This definition attempts to mirror the ACE Pathways to the Presidency Definition.<sup>12</sup> Whether or not the president's immediate prior position was outside higher education (OHE), as defined by the Beardsley ACE category mapping.</p> <p>1 = immediate prior position was outside of higher education 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014
IF OHE, job category	If the president's immediate prior position was OHE, then the immediate prior position was put into a job category (government/political, law, business, military, other).	Derived from job title of immediate prior position	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Both prior positions OHE?	<p>Whether or not the president's last two positions prior to assuming current presidency were outside higher education.</p> <p>1 = [HE1=0 &amp; HE2 = 0] 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from HE1 and HE2	Internet search conducted in June 2014
*If last two positions were OHE, any other HE experience?	<p>This variable, which was only examined for presidents whose past two positions were outside higher education, captures whether or not the president has other higher education-related work experience.</p> <p>1 = [HE1=0 &amp; HE2 = 0 and has other higher education-related] 0 = otherwise</p>	Derived from HE1 and HE2	Internet search conducted in June 2014
*Other HE experience category	This variable, which was only examined for presidents whose past two positions were outside higher education, describes other higher education-related experience, if any, the president has into one of the following categories: Faculty, administration, trustee, other.	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Acting/interim president ever?	<p>Whether or not the president has been an acting or interim president in his/her career prior to assuming current presidency.</p> <p>1 = president has been an acting or interim president prior to assuming current presidency 0 = otherwise</p>	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014

<sup>12</sup> King, Y. M., & Cook, B. J. (2013, March). On the pathway to the presidency 2013: Characteristics of higher education's senior leadership. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

*Nontraditional presidents only - Previously an employee or board member at current institution?	<p>This variable examined only whether nontraditional candidates of the Beardsley definition were previously an employee or board member at the institution at which they are currently president, reducing the sample size.</p> <p>This data was collected only for nontraditional presidents.</p> <p>1 = president was an employee or board member at current institution prior to presidency 0 = otherwise</p>	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
*Nontraditional presidents only - Alumni of current employer?	<p>This variable examined only alumni affiliation for nontraditional candidates of the Beardsley definition, reducing the sample size.</p> <p>1 = president is a graduate of the institution at which he/she is currently serving as president 0 = otherwise</p>	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Doctorate	<p>Whether or not the president has a doctorate degree.</p> <p>1 = president has a doctorate 0 = otherwise</p>	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014
Doctorate type	<p>This variable categorizes the type of doctorate into one of the following groups: PhD, education-related, JD, medical, other.</p>	Diverse sources	Internet search conducted in June 2014

Notes:

1. Descriptions of IPEDS variables, for the most part, are the verbatim descriptions provided by IPEDS.
2. St. John's College, which has two college campuses (Annapolis & Santa Fe), is treated as one campus by US NEWS and as two campuses by IPEDS. Since this project looks at the US liberal arts institutions as per US NEWS, IPEDS data for both St. John's College campuses were aggregated. For variables given in total units (e.g., Core revenues, total dollars; Estimated full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment; etc.), aggregation was calculated by taking the sum of the two campuses. For percentage variables or *per FTE* variables, a weighted average was calculated.
3. IPEDS contains variables of interest that follow a specific accounting methodology provide data only for the institutions that use that methodology. For such variables, two to three mutually exclusive variables were imported and combined into one column. An example is *Core Expenses*. Three variables of core expenses data had to be imported from IPEDS (for public institutions using GASB 34/35 standard, for public and private not-for-profit institutions using FASB standards, and for private for-profit institutions using FASB standards) and combined into one column/variable.
4. Weighted tuition and fees 2007–2008, which is used to calculate average tuition discounting for public institutions in 2007–2008, was calculated using the same in- and out-of-state enrollment numbers from various years that were used in the weighted tuition and fees 2012–2013



calculations. The assumption made is that in- and out-of-state enrollment remained constant between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.

#### Appendix D: IPEDS Institutional Variable Description Summary

Variable Name	Description	Source(s)	Year
Estimated full-time-equivalent (FTE) undergraduate enrollment	For institutions with a semester, trimester, or 4-1-4 plan, the number of FTE undergraduate is the sum of undergraduate credit hours divided by 30 and contact hours divided by 900. For institutions with a quarter plan, undergraduate credit hours were divided by 45 and contact hours were divided by 900. For institutions with continuous enrollment over a 12-month period, undergraduate credit hours were divided by 30 and contact hours were divided by 900.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Estimated full-time-equivalent (FTE) graduate enrollment	For institutions with a semester, trimester, or 4-1-4 plan, the number of FTE graduate students is the number of graduate credit hours divided by 24. For institutions with a quarter plan, graduate FTE is the number of graduate credit hours divided by 36.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
12-month full-time-equivalent enrollment	The full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment used is the sum of the institutions' FTE undergraduate enrollment and FTE graduate enrollment (as calculated from or reported on the 12-month enrollment component) plus the estimated FTE of first-professional students. Undergraduate and graduate FTE are estimated using 12-month instructional activity (credit and/or contact hours).	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% five-year change of 12-month full-time equivalent enrollment	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Undergraduate FTE enrollment as % of total FTE enrollment	Undergraduate FTE enrollment divided by total FTE enrollment.	IPEDS	2012-2013
Value of endowment assets at the end of the fiscal year	Consists of gross investments of endowment funds, term endowment funds, and funds functioning as endowment for the institution and any of its foundations and other affiliated organizations.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% five-year change of value of endowment assets at the end of the fiscal year	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Endowment assets (year-end) per FTE enrollment	Endowment assets at the end of the fiscal year divided by 12-month FTE enrollment. This is a measure of an institution's wealth.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% five-year change of endowment assets (year-end) per FTE enrollment, total dollars between 2007–2008 and	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008

2012–2013			
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Core revenues total dollars	<p><i>Core revenues, total dollars</i> for public institutions using GASB 34/35 standard are derived by adding revenues from the following sources:</p> <p>Tuition and fees revenues (F1B01), State government appropriation revenues F1B11, Local government appropriation revenues F1B12, Federal operating grants and contracts (F1B02), State operating grants and contracts (F1B03), Local operating grants and contracts (F1B04), Other operating sources (F1B08), Federal appropriations (F1B10), Federal nonoperating grants (F1B13), State nonoperating grants (F1B14), Local nonoperating grants (F1B15), Gifts, including contributions from affiliated organizations (F1B16), Investment income (F1B17), Other nonoperating revenues (F1B18), Total other revenues and additions (F1B24), Sales and services of educational activities (F1B26)</p> <p>Core revenues, total dollars for public and private not-for-profit institutions using FASB standards are derived by adding revenues from the following sources:</p> <p>Tuition and fees revenues (F2D01), Federal appropriations (F2D02), State appropriations (F2D03), Local appropriations (F2D04), Federal grants and contracts (F2D05), State grants and contracts (F2D06), Local grants and contracts (F2D07), Private gifts, grants, and contracts (F2D08), Contributions from affiliated entities (F2D09), Investment return (F2D10), Sales and services of educational activities (F2D11), Other revenues (F2D15)</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% five-year change of core revenues total dollars between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Revenues from tuition and fees per FTE	Revenues from tuition and fees divided by 12-month FTE enrollment (FTE12MN)	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% five-year change of revenues from tuition and fees per FTE between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008

Revenues from tuition and fees— Total	<p><b>Public institutions:</b> Tuition and fees are revenues from all tuition and fees assessed against students (net of refunds and discounts and allowances) for educational purposes. If tuition or fees are remitted to the state as an offset to the state appropriation, the total of such tuition or fees should be deducted from the total state appropriation and added to the total for tuition and fees. If an all-inclusive charge is made for tuition, board, room, and other services, a reasonable distribution is made between revenues for tuition and fees and revenues for auxiliary enterprises. Tuition and fees excludes charges for room, board, and other services rendered by auxiliary enterprises.</p> <p><b>Private institutions:</b> The amount of tuition and educational fees, net of any allowances applied in the general purpose financial statements. Included in this amount are fees for continuing education programs, conferences, and seminars.</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Absolute change in total tuition and fees revenues over five-year period 2007–2008 and 2012–2013	The absolute change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% Absolute change in total tuition and fees revenues over five-year period 2007–2008 and 2012–2013	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Tuition and fees as a percent of core revenues	Revenues from tuition and fees divided by core revenues	IPEDS	2012-2013& 2007-2008
% five-year change of tuition and fees as a percent of core revenues between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013& 2007-2008

Core expenses total dollars	<p><b>For public institutions using GASB 34/35 standard are derived by adding expenses for the following functions:</b> Instruction (F1C011), Research (F1C021), Public service (F1C031), Academic support (F1C051), Student services (F1C061), Institutional support (F1C071), Scholarships and fellowships expenses (F1C101), Other expenses and deductions (F1C141)</p> <p><b>For public and private not-for-profit institutions using FASB standards are derived by adding expenses for the following functions:</b> Instruction (F2E011), Research (F2E021), Public service (F2E031), Academic support (F2E041), Student services (F2E051), Institutional support (F2E061), Net grant aid to students (F2E081), Other expenses (F2E121).</p> <p><b>For private for-profit institutions using FASB standards are derived by adding expenses for the following functions:</b> Instruction (F3E01), Research and public service (F3E02), Academic and institutional support, and student services (F3E03), Net grant aid to students (F3E05), All other expenses (F3E06)</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013&2007-2008
Absolute five-year change core expenses total dollars between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013	The absolute change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013&2007-2008
% five-year change core expenses total dollars between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013&2007-2008
Published in-state tuition and fees	For public institutions, tuition and fees charged to full-time students who are in-state. For <b>private schools</b> , this is the list price institutions charge full-time students regardless of whether in- or out-of-state.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Published out-of-state tuition and fees	For public institutions, tuition and fees charged to full-time students who are out-of-state. For <b>private schools</b> , this is the list price institutions charge full-time students regardless of whether in- or out-of-state.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% five-year absolute change of published in-state tuition and fees	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013&2007-2008
% five-year absolute change of published out-of-state tuition and fees	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013&2007-2008

In-state enrollment %	<b>For public schools only</b> , the percentage of students at an institution that are in-state.	College Board	years are unknown <sup>13</sup>
Out-of-state Enrollment %	<b>For public schools only</b> , the percentage of students at an institution that are out-of-state.	College Board	years are unknown <sup>14</sup>
Weighted tuition <sup>15</sup>	<b>For public schools only</b> , a weighted figure for tuition was generated in order to account for the fact that in-state and out-of-state students are subject to different tuition and fees, and was calculated as follows:  $= (\text{In-state tuition and fees} * \text{In-state Enrollment \%}) + (\text{Out-of-state tuition and fees} * \text{Out-of-state Enrollment \%})$	Derived from IPEDS and College Board data.	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
% five-year absolute change of weighted tuition	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS & College Board data.	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Investment return—Total	Investment return includes the following amounts: all investment income (i.e., interest, dividends, rents, and royalties); gains and losses (realized and unrealized) from holding investments (regardless of the nature of the investment); student loan interest; and amounts distributed from irrevocable trusts held by others (collectively referred to as "investment return").	IPEDS	2012-2013

<sup>13</sup> Data limitation: the information contained in the College Search Tool is provided by the institution that is displayed. Due to the fact that each institution updates their specific information on their own time, the specific year for each institution is unknown. The College Search Tool was consulted in June 2014. It is believed that the data is from school year 2012–2013, the last full school year for which data is reported, or at worst case 2011–2012, and is thus an adequate approximation to make the weighted average calculations of tuition.

<sup>14</sup> Same as footnote 1.

<sup>15</sup> Due to the data limitation mentioned in the previous two footnotes, weighted tuition is an estimation.

Institutional grants	<p><b>Public institutions: sum (a) and (b)</b></p> <p>(a) Institutional grants from restricted sources are expenditures for scholarships and fellowships received from private sources (e.g., businesses, foundations, individuals, foreign governments) that used restricted-expendable net assets of the institution.</p> <p>(b) Institutional grants from unrestricted sources are expenditures for scholarships and fellowships from unrestricted net assets of the institution.</p> <p>The institutional matching portion of federal, state, or local grants is reported here. Athletic scholarships are also included here.</p> <p><b>Private institutions: sum (c) and (d)</b></p> <p>(c) Institutional grants (funded) includes the amounts awarded to students from institutional resources restricted for the purpose of student aid, such as scholarships and fellowships funded by gifts or endowment return restricted for that purpose.</p> <p>(d) Institutional grants (unfunded) includes the amount awarded to students from unrestricted institutional resources.</p> <p><b>Private for-profit institutions:</b></p> <p>Institutional grants includes the amounts awarded to students from institutional resources.</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013
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<p>Total amount of institutional grant aid received by full-time, first-time undergraduates (2012–2013)</p>	<p>Institutional grants—Scholarships and fellowships granted and funded by the institution and/or individual departments within the institution, (i.e., instruction, research, public service) that may contribute indirectly to the enhancement of these programs. Includes scholarships targeted to certain individuals (e.g., based on state of residence, major field of study, athletic team participation) for which the institution designates the recipient.</p> <p>Undergraduate—A student enrolled in a four- or five-year bachelor's degree program, an associate's degree program, or a vocational or technical program below the baccalaureate.</p> <p>Full-time student (undergraduate)—A student enrolled for 12 or more semester credits, or 12 or more quarter credits, or 24 or more contact hours a week each term.</p> <p>First-time student (undergraduate)—A student attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. Includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs. Also includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer term, and students who entered with advanced standing (college credits earned before graduation from high school).</p> <p>Degree/certificate-seeking students—Students enrolled in courses for credit who are recognized by the institution as seeking a degree or other formal award. At the undergraduate level, this is intended to include students enrolled in vocational or occupational programs.</p>	<p>IPEDS</p>	<p>2012-2013 &amp; 2007-2008</p>
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Average amount of institutional grant aid received by full-time, first-time undergraduates	<p><b>Institutional grants</b>—Scholarships and fellowships granted and funded by the institution and/or individual departments within the institution, (i.e., instruction, research, public service) that may contribute indirectly to the enhancement of these programs. Includes scholarships targeted to certain individuals (e.g., based on state of residence, major field of study, athletic team participation) for which the institution designates the recipient.</p> <p><b>Undergraduate</b>—A student enrolled in a four- or five-year bachelor's degree program, an associate's degree program, or a vocational or technical program below the baccalaureate.</p> <p><b>Full-time student (undergraduate)</b>—A student enrolled for 12 or more semester credits, or 12 or more quarter credits, or 24 or more contact hours a week each term.</p> <p><b>First-time student (undergraduate)</b>—A student attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. Includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs. Also includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer term, and students who entered with advanced standing (college credits earned before graduation from high school).</p> <p><b>Degree/certificate-seeking students</b>—Students enrolled in courses for credit who are recognized by the institution as seeking a degree or other formal award. At the undergraduate level, this is intended to include students enrolled in vocational or occupational programs.</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Admissions yield—Total	Admissions yield = number enrolled (ENRLT) divided by the number admitted (ADMSSN). Ratios are converted to percentages and rounded to the nearest whole number.	IPEDS	2012-2013
Acceptance rate	Total number of students admitted divided by total number of applicants.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Differential five-year acceptance rate	Acceptance rate in 2012–2013 minus acceptance rate in 2007–2008.	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008



Percent of full-time, first-time undergraduates receiving institutional grant aid	<p><b>Institutional grants</b>—Scholarships and fellowships granted and funded by the institution and/or individual departments within the institution, (i.e., instruction, research, public service) that may contribute indirectly to the enhancement of these programs. Includes scholarships targeted to certain individuals (e.g., based on state of residence, major field of study, athletic team participation) for which the institution designates the recipient.</p> <p><b>Undergraduate</b>—A student enrolled in a four- or five-year bachelor's degree program, an associate's degree program, or a vocational or technical program below the baccalaureate.</p> <p><b>Full-time student (undergraduate)</b>—A student enrolled for 12 or more semester credits, or 12 or more quarter credits, or 24 or more contact hours a week each term.</p> <p><b>First-time student (undergraduate)</b>—A student attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. Includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs. Also includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer term, and students who entered with advanced standing (college credits earned before graduation from high school).</p> <p><b>Degree/certificate-seeking students</b>—Students enrolled in courses for credit who are recognized by the institution as seeking a degree or other formal award. At the undergraduate level, this is intended to include students enrolled in vocational or occupational programs.</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008
Percent first-year, full-time FULL PAY	The percent of first-year students who pay full tuition (i.e., do not receive any institutional grant aid). This variable was derived by subtracting from 100 the value for the variable <i>percent of full-time, first-time undergraduates receiving institutional grant aid</i> .	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013 & 2007-2008

Graduation rate— bachelor's degree within six years total	<p>Four-year graduation rate of the subcohort of full-time, first-time students seeking a bachelor's or equivalent degree—2007 bachelor's subcohort (four-year institutions)</p> <p>This rate is calculated as the total number of students completing a bachelor's degree or equivalent within four years (100% of normal time) divided by the revised bachelor's subcohort minus any allowable exclusions.</p> <p>The adjusted bachelor's subcohort is defined by the variable GRTOTLT when GRTYPE=8 and the total students completing a bachelor's degree or equivalent within four years is GRTOTLT when GRTYPE=13(Table gr2013).</p> <p>Bachelor's or equivalent degree-seeking subcohort—In the GRS component of IPEDS, a cohort of students who were seeking a bachelor's or equivalent degree upon entry.</p> <p>Normal time to completion—The amount of time necessary for a student to complete all requirements for a degree or certificate according to the institution's catalog. This is typically four years (eight semesters or trimesters, or 12 quarters, excluding summer terms) for a bachelor's degree in a standard term-based institution.</p> <p>Allowable exclusions—Those students who may be removed (deleted) from the GRS cohort according to the Student Right-to-Know legislation. These include students who died or were totally and permanently disabled; those who left school to serve in the armed forces; those who left to serve with a foreign aid service of the federal government, such as the Peace Corps; and those who left to serve on an official church mission.</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013
All full-time instructional staff— Total	Instructional staff on nine-, 10-, 11-, or 12-month contract—total	IPEDS	2012-2013& 2007-2008
% five-year absolute change of all full- time instructional staff—Total	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013& 2007-2008

Total FTE staff	<p>The full-time-equivalent (FTE) of staff is calculated by summing the total number of full-time staff and adding one-third of the total number of part-time staff.</p> <p>The positions included are the following: instructional staff, management, other professional, and nonprofessional.<sup>16</sup></p> <p>Thus,</p> <p>Total FTE staff = instructional full-time staff + (instructional part-time staff/3) + management full-time staff + (management part-time staff/3) + other professional full-time staff + (other professional part-time staff/3) + nonprofessional full-time staff + (nonprofessional full-time staff/3)</p>	IPEDS	2012-2013& 2007-2008
% five-year absolute change of total FTE staff	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013& 2007-2008
Instructional staff as % of total FTE staff	All full-time instructional staff total divided by total FTE staff.	Derived from IPEDS data	2012-2013
Core expenses as % of total revenues	Core expenses divided total revenues.	Derived from IPEDS data	2012-2013
Tuition and fee revenues as a % of core expenses	Tuition and fee revenues divided by core expenses.	Derived from IPEDS data	2012-2013
Investment return as % of core revenues	Investment return divided by core revenues.	Derived from IPEDS data	2012-2013
Core Operating Margin	Core Operating Margin = (core revenues - core expenses) / core revenues	Derived from IPEDS data	2012-2013
Average tuition-discount rate	<p><b>For private institutions:</b></p> <p>= (avg institutional aid per student * % of students receiving institutional aid/100)/ tuition and fees</p> <p><b>For public institutions:</b></p> <p>= (avg institutional aid per student * % of students receiving institutional aid/100)/ weighted tuition and fees</p>	Derived from IPEDS and College Board data.	2012-2013& 2007-2008
% five-year absolute change of average tuition discount rate	The absolute percentage change for this variable between the academic years 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.	Derived from IPEDS	2012-2013& 2007-2008

<sup>16</sup> These details are not provided by the IPEDS website. An IPEDS representative provided this information.

Notes:

5. Descriptions of IPEDS variables, for the most part, are the verbatim descriptions provided by IPEDS.
6. St. John's College, which has two college campuses (Annapolis & Santa Fe), is treated as one campus by US NEWS and as two campuses by IPEDS. Since this project looks at the US liberal arts institutions as per US NEWS, IPEDS data for both St. John's College campuses were aggregated. For variables given in total units (e.g., Core revenues, total dollars; Estimated full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment; etc.), aggregation was calculated by taking the sum of the two campuses. For percentage variables or *per FTE* variables, a weighted average was calculated.
7. IPEDS contains variables of interest that follow a specific accounting methodology provide data only for the institutions that use that methodology. For such variables, two to three mutually exclusive variables were imported and combined into one column. An example is *Core Expenses*. Three variables of core expenses data had to be imported from IPEDS (for public institutions using GASB 34/35 standard, for public and private not-for-profit institutions using FASB standards, and for private for-profit institutions using FASB standards) and combined into one column/variable.
8. Weighted tuition and fees 2007–2008, which is used to calculate average tuition discounting for public institutions in 2007–2008, was calculated using the same in- and out-of-state enrollment numbers from various years that were used in the weighted tuition and fees 2012–2013 calculations. The assumption made is that in- and out-of-state enrollment remained constant between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013.

## **Appendix E: Limitations, Validity of Findings**

I have employed a number of methods to verify and enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the findings. Creswell outlines eight validation strategies that can be used in research, including: prolonged engagement and persistent observation; triangulation; peer review or debriefing; negative case analysis; clarifying researcher bias; member checking; rich, thick description; and external audits (Creswell, 2012). Of these, the main methods of validation proposed will be triangulation and clarifying researcher bias.

To clarify researcher bias, from a positionality and personal point of view, the motivation for exploring this topic is important. I am a potential nontraditional candidate with a business background in management consultancy and am not from academe. I have actively explored the possibility of one day becoming a liberal arts college president, and have actually been involved in recent searches, instead ultimately accepting the position of dean at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business starting August 1, 2015. Further, in my role at McKinsey, we occasionally hire search firms and often interact with search firms to place consultants to their searches. This could be misconstrued as compromising objectivity. By exploring the topic, I have gained insight into the process, met many of the important players and search firms, and learned from the very few nontraditional candidates that have made it to president. However, this fact clearly means that my self-interest in the role may create situational bias. First, I could be perceived as having confirmation bias that my own profile may be attractive in the hopes that this future career avenue may have promise. Further, I will have to endeavor mightily to explore the alternative hypothesis that nontraditional candidates may actually not be good future candidates by ensuring that the rationale

against nontraditional candidates is explored fully. Third, I must be keenly aware that those being interviewed may also bias their answers given my background as a consultant and business executive. To this end, my background and transparency around personal interest has been disclosed to the interviewees so that my positionality is bracketed. Further, I have made it clear that this research has no affiliation with McKinsey & Company.

The construction of a fact-based database profiling the pathways and backgrounds of current liberal arts college presidents may be viewed as a strength. It is objective and will provide quantifiable facts about nontraditional liberal arts presidents. A limitation to the quantitative database is that it was reliant on the self-reported biographies of the presidents. It is believed that most presidents accurately report their credentials and, in particular, mention their academic credentials explicitly as it is in their interest to be academically credible. If a president did not have clear academic credentials indicating a tenure-track position, he or she was categorized as nontraditional. To eliminate all uncertainty, interviews would need to be conducted with each president and his or her credentials validated by a third party. This research was unable to do that. Another limitation is the possibility of human encoding error.

Additionally, linkage of the type of president to financial, selectivity, ranking, and other institutional data where they preside should also be considered a strength as it allows fact-based assessments of the current situation and whether there are any relationships between financial context, selectivity, and type of president to be established. The completeness of the data set of all 248 liberal arts colleges' financial, selectivity, and presidential background pathway data provides statistical significance.

Descriptive statistical analyses describe statistical relationships between various combinations of pathways, selectivity, and financial data, although it is not able to determine causality.

The qualitative interviews' reliance on the self-reporting of the four presidents can be viewed as both a strength and weakness. It is a strength because the research centers on understanding how they experienced the process and what they learned rather than trying to prove an absolute truth. As such, their testimony should be germane and valid. If the research would focus on specifically how and why the nontraditional president was selected versus others, then interviews of multiple other search committee members would be essential. Further, development of themes shared by the presidents should strengthen the validity of the lessons learned, although the sample size is small. Further triangulation is augmented by the written data. Nevertheless, a limitation is that the research is dependent upon what the presidents say, and the presidents might choose to rewrite history in a more favorable light than is warranted, or to ignore certain difficulties encountered.

To triangulate the factors that promote and impede the selection and success of nontraditional liberal arts college presidents in the selection process, the inclusion of executive search firms is essential. While they are not able to triangulate on the specific situations of each nontraditional president interviewed, they provide fact-based insight into the factors that help or hinder nontraditional candidates regularly in searches, and identify trends in searches. Additionally, search firms have no incentive to either promote or discourage nontraditional candidates and play a bridge role between both the search committees and the candidates. Given that many of the search consultants have

conducted multiple liberal arts presidential searches, their insights should be a strength. However, the ability to extrapolate their views to all liberal arts colleges is somewhat limited, given that their reality has been shaped by the searches they have conducted, which are by definition a subset of the entire college universe.

A limitation of the study is that the sample size is only representative of the institutions and presidents interviewed and analyzed. While some quantitative relationships will be able to be established from the database and statistical analyses, the experiences and lessons learned of the four college presidents under study will certainly be of interest and relevant to future candidates but cannot be viewed as a statistically significant representation of all nontraditional presidents currently in office. Although the conclusions will have applicability to nontraditional presidents in the liberal arts, extrapolating conclusions to all universities would require a broader sample since the liberal arts colleges have different characteristics than large research universities. The findings that will be reported, therefore, will only be fully valid for the sample included in the study. It should also be acknowledged that the research design chosen has inherent strengths and weaknesses.

The phenomenon of nontraditional college presidents in the liberal arts context, their pathways, and how they navigated the factors that impede or promote their progress is inherently a study about what has worked and been challenging but overcome. The study neither examines nontraditional college presidents who have failed in the liberal arts context, nor does it examine traditional college presidents and the factors that have promoted or impeded their selection and success. Finally, the study does not attempt to interview a representative sample of people who were part of the nontraditional



presidents' specific selection processes. They might have a different point of view than the president.

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